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Dismantling the Master's House: The Afterlife of Slavery in Twentieth-Century Representations of Home

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Dismantling the Master's House: The Afterlife of Slavery in Twentieth-Century Representations of Home

by

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Dismantling the Master's House: The Afterlife of Slavery in Twentieth-Century Representations of Home

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This dissertation explores the historical and contemporary interactions between blackness and the structure, sense, and practice of home. Informed by Afro-pessimist scholarship that finds traces of the logic of slavery in present-day cultural and social formations, this project describes the plantation as a tangle of conflicting, interacting, and antagonistic homes. Taking as its central object(s) the different structures of home on the plantation—for example, the white supremacist-masculinist dominion and racial anxiety that informs what home means for the slave-master, or the artful fugitive practices that allowed the enslaved to hide their homes in plain sight—this dissertation explores the way these social and material structures haunt representations of home in 20th century art and literature, thus mapping the locations where blackness and home constitute and produce one another.

The intervention of this project is two-fold: First, it seeks to trouble the assumptions of certain strains of Afro-pessimist thought—particularly those invested in a totalizing narrative of perpetual, inescapable violence and oppression, rooted in plantation slavery but extant in the present. By looking at how black writers, thinkers, and visual artists in the 20th century engage the structure, space, and affect of home, this project charts a counterhistory of resistance and freedom rooted in the geography and culture of slavery but fugitive from its logics of domination. Second, it seeks to theorize "home" in a way that disengages the term from normative domesticity, opening the concept to include alternate ways of being at home not rooted in power or possession but rather in a sociality that antagonizes the normative domestic through its embrace of fugitivity. Following scholars who engage critical geography to disrupt flattened or overdetermined understandings of home, I look for moments that both confirm and disrupt dominant narratives about the legacy of slavery and its impact on home. My project thus works to complicate our understanding of how the past shapes and delimits individual and collective freedom in the present.

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Introduction

"Home is not where you were born; home is where all your attempts to escape cease. "

—Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006)

In 1979, Audre Lorde delivered a paper at the Second Sex Conference entitled, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." In this paper, she lays out the stakes of intersectional feminism, demanding not only a tolerance of difference but a recognition that only through the dynamic polarities of difference might actual social change come to be. Her talk builds to the statement that would give title to her paper: "*For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change."[1] At this key moment in the development of feminist ideology and praxis, Lorde chose a house as her metaphor for the structures of power that continue, then as now, to undermine the possibility of real social change.

Home has been and remains a central locus of social power and, therefore, of social struggle. This fact makes it a particularly apt location from which to begin an interrogation of the possibility and limitations of black freedom in the 20th century. The labor of enslaved people kept up the master's house to which Lorde refers, and the same master's house owed its material existence to the wealth produced via the oppressive system of slavery. Meanwhile, the enslaved built homes of their own, despite the

[1] Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983).

plantation's pretensions to totality. Following Emancipation, home became a site through which newly-free black persons articulated their citizenship and argued for their propriety and deservingness. Homes of poor or working-class black persons were a focus of racial uplift campaigns, while black domestic workers took care of the homes and families of white elites. Despite the long history of scholarship on the relationship between black persons and the overdetermined category of "domesticity," however, only recently have scholars begun to imagine what else black "homes" might be, outside of this prescriptive rubric.

This recent scholarship, and the lacunae in research it points to, impels the central questions of this dissertation. How did people make homes or make themselves at home within the foundational violence of plantation slavery? How do those forms of home then travel from that historical reality into the art and literature of the 20th century? How do representations of home change and shift as black Americans gain access to new sources of individual and social power?

At core, this dissertation seeks to uncover how fictional representations of home draw on the history of plantation slavery to uncover strategies for the production of free selves within a world still structured by oppressive social hierarchies. This line of inquiry seeks to trouble the assumptions of Afro-pessimist thinking, described in more detail later in this introduction. In particular, I seek to disrupt the strains of theory that invest in a totalizing narrative of perpetual, inescapable violence and oppression, rooted in plantation slavery but extant in the present. Instead, I offer the home as a concept through which scholars might be able to see the persistence of resistance, theft, absence, and other

strategies of liberation, beyond and within the well-documented history of racial oppression.

HOME AS PRACTICE

Before examining historical forms of home, as I will do in the first chapter, I must begin by defining what it is I mean when I say the word home. Too often, academic scholarship flattens the concept of home, conflating it with "the domestic" and failing to interrogate the relationship between these two discrete terms. However, home is a more slippery category that such thinking allows, as there is maybe nothing so fraught and yet so unquestioned and naturalized as the concept of home. An individual's conception of the term inevitably rises up—be it good or bad—any time someone invokes the term. The difficulty of conceptualizing home lies in the fact that it, as a term, has a shared significance but extensive particularities. Homes seek a normative ideal, but these normative ideals vary widely even within a shared culture. Home creates and inhabits a legible space, but simultaneously affirms ties of intimacy by working to control who can or cannot read or access the space it produces. I am drawn to the current scholarship that has begun to move away from defining home through the lens of mainstream domesticity, describing what homes might exist beyond this firm conceptual boundary.[2] Following this turn in scholarship, my dissertation seeks to offer a new frame through which

[2] The key writing in this new move toward a broader understanding of home is Sara Ahmed, Claudia Catañeda, Anne-Marie Fortier, and Mimi Sheller, eds., *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, New York: Berg Press, 2003. Also useful are Iris Marion Young, "House and Home: Feminist Variations on a Theme," *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1997: 134-164; Doreen Massey, "A Place Called Home?" *Space, Place, and Gender*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994: 157-174; Allison Blunt and Robyn M. Dowling, *Home,* New York: Routledge, 2006; among others.

scholars might think about home, in order to continue this move toward an understanding of home that might offer more egalitarian access to the protections and rights afforded by the term.

The key to this kind of significant but inclusive definition of such an unwieldy object as home is to conceive of it not as a single material thing or space, but rather as a practice that engages an assemblage of material objects, relationships, spaces, habits, actions, senses, emotions, affects, tastes, smells, and so on, in order to produce a culturally legible space, sense, or affect. The assemblage is not a fixed collection but a potentially shifting assortment of things that can come into and out of connection with one another depending on the various factors that might impact such connections.[3] The home(s) I imagine, then, look more like the shape a flock of birds make than a single-family dwelling with a yard and picket fence. The picket fence might be an object of aspiration or a material marker that at some point becomes part of the collection that constitutes an individual's home, but the picket fence need not be a permanent part of the assemblage. Further, the same physical picket fence might serve in one assemblage as a positive boundary that indicates belonging within an intimate group, while functioning as an exclusionary boundary in the home assemblage of the child who lives one yard over. This is just one example, but the idea is to allow a shared set of *things* (objects, relationships, spaces, habits, etc.) to be part of multiple homes simultaneously, without demanding a kind of exclusivity, possession, or ultimate meaning for any given one.

[3] My conceptualization of the assemblage grows from Deleuze and Guittari's seminal work in *A Thousand Plateaus*, and is also greatly informed by the work of Bruno Latour on actor-network theory in his text *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford UP, 2005).

It is for this reason that practice is central to my definition and understanding of home. As I mentioned above, I want to move the definition of home away from residential space, the nuclear family, or a legally protected private sphere. Rather, I see home as a practice that engages an assemblage of elements, like those listed above, in order to produce something legible within a culture. The home need not be legible to a dominant group to be culturally legible, as a dominant culture may not be the only extant culture in a given milieu. Indeed, as I will argue in the next chapter, illegibility to systems of domination can actually serve to protect vulnerable homes. Despite this potential for misrecognition, however, the word "home" also has a linguistic meaning that registers across cultures that share a language, indicating a shared set of elements that mark home. If the product of home is culturally legible, it must offer some recognizable set of attributes that mark it for those who would see, hear of, or otherwise experience it. Often in the literature, home is defined as a particular sort of space that incubates and protects particular kinds of relationships and feelings—a single-family dwelling, for example, that protects the heteronormative nuclear family and produces the privacy and safety necessary for good citizenship. If home is, as I contend, a practice, however, the spatial result is not necessarily the core of home. Rather, the core of home is what it *does*. Home intends to incubate, resuscitate, and insulate the self, providing a venue—either physical or psychic—in which the activities and relationships critical to the protection and reproduction of cultural life can occur. The result of this practice, therefore, might be the dwelling described above, but its result might also be something else entirely. Home is not solely geography or architecture, although both those ways of knowing might inform

the sense of home. Home as I conceive of it is a practice that produces an affective charge—a sense of being-at-home, created through the orientation of material bodies and objects toward or away from one another in a shifting and familiar assemblage.

To my thinking, the practice of home serves the central purpose of mediating an individual's experience of precarity. Judith Butler's essays in *Precarious Life* (2004) provide the foundation for my engagement with this term. Butler writes about what she calls "primary vulnerability"—the idea that humans are all subject to a "vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt."[4] Precariousness, or precarity as I term it, emerges from the knowledge of this vulnerability, even when that "knowledge" might be embodied or instinctual rather than cognitive. A sense of precarity arises when a person becomes aware of his or her primary, bodily vulnerability and the corollary dependency on others to permit and sustain both cultural and individual life. Butler connects this experience of precarity to the concept of mastery, writing that while an acknowledgement of vulnerability and our fundamental dependency on others presents an opportunity to invest in non-violent or non-military solutions or redress, the response to vulnerability often takes the form of a "fantasy of mastery"[5] that can produce or provoke violent, militarized responses. Although Butler specifically seeks to understand the changes in the world wrought by the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001, this fantasy of mastery also appears in more mundane historical practices of control or containment that seek to

[4] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (New York: Verso, 2004): 29.
[5] Ibid.

disavow precarity. The home itself illustrates a fantasy of mastery at times, although as Butler points out, one's relationship to precarity—whether it is acknowledged or disavowed—plays a primary role in how one chooses to respond to its inescapable presence.

Precarity is a useful concept in that it allows for the existence of a sense of danger without demanding the presence of an explicit, perceptible threat. Butler is careful to argue that while vulnerability may be universally human, it must be "perceived and recognized in order to come into play in an ethical encounter."[6] This is incredibly useful when we think about the role of precarity in the ethics of conflict. Ethical impact aside, however, Butler maintains that a "'common' corporeal vulnerability"[7] exists for all humans, whether they choose to recognize it or not. Precarity as I use it here and as it informs the practice of home does not require conscious recognition to exist. Often, it makes its presence known through the appearance of practices that work to deny its existence, meaning that the subject engaged in a home might never consciously experience precarity despite actively working against it. I contend that people often experience precarity affectively rather than intellectually or emotionally,[8] as a pre-

[6] Ibid., 43.
[7] Ibid., 42.
[8] The relationship between affect and emotion is complex and well-studied, although at this point still not completely understood or agreed upon by scholars. To my thinking and training, affect is something that exists before analysis or naming—affect is a pre-emotional embodied sensation—which is what makes it different than emotion as we generally understand it. One might experience something one later labels as "anger," even though in the moment what that person felt in his or her body had not yet been given a name. In this project, then, emotion is something narrativized, invested with meaning, and used to communicate more simply and easily with other human beings that share our languages and cultures. Affect is whatever comes before that—a moment of knowing, a sinking feeling, a sureness, a motion toward or away from something, a tingling. Neither is privileged here as a superior object of analysis, but they are absolutely different and need to be marked as such.

cognitive, embodied sense or sensation rather than a narrativized, named category of feeling that is imbued with cultural meaning. Precarity might take the form of a visceral sense of dread, for example, or a heightened anxiety vibrating through the bodies engaged in a home, attaching itself to any object or idea it bumps up against. Precarity might appear in a silent room full of people exchanging glances as an embodied knowledge of danger flies about like a trapped bird, or in the quiet desire to drink oneself into oblivion of one's own volition before the unpredictable mess of human circumstance offers an arbitrary obliteration instead. These moments take on meaning when someone calls them "fear," "frustration," or "hopelessness," and a person might seek to communicate them to another human being or to oneself using a rational, relatable narrative—anything from the bad stock performance that threatens a retirement account to the fact of sharing a physical space with a person who might someday kill you. Narratives attach meaning to affects and allow us to compare and contrast dangers, risks, and safety nets, something Butler correctly insists is important as certain social conditions can exacerbate feelings of precarity for those with less access to the means or opportunity for self-defense.[9] For my general definition of home, however, these narratives matter less than the embodied experience that occurs before they arise. Dangers might be particular, and so might individuals' responses to them, but the sense of precarity as I define it here is universally human.

Home, then, stands as a medium through which its inhabitant(s) can negotiate the affective experience of precarity, attempting to push it away although also potentially

[9] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 29.

confirming the presence of a threat through the set of practices that work against it. Setha Low's *Behind the Gates: Life, Security, and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America* (2003) offers an illustrative example of the way home might precipitate precarity through the very practices intended to ward it off. Her text finds that fear and uncertainty are central among the reasons given by inhabitants of gated communities for their choice to live in such a neighborhood. While the source of fear was different for many of the residents Low interviewed, their living "behind the gates" was consistently framed as an attempt on their part to mediate their fear through the practice of home. However, Low found that life behind the gates often produced as much fear as it mitigated—in fact, those living in these "safe" neighborhoods ended up feeling more precarious than people living outside of them. Driving through the gate, a practice meant to invoke a sense of safety in the inhabitants of the neighborhood, served as a reminder of the dangers that exist in the wider world. Those living in a house without a gate might be able to forget the thieves at the door, but those in a gated community are reminded of their perceived presence, and the need to protect against it, every day.[10]

Home might also precipitate precarity in what Lauren Berlant terms its "cruel optimism," which she defines as a relation in which "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing."[11] Because home—particularly in the form of an idealized space of private property, separate and safe from the wider world—has always been central to the American Dream, it remains deeply tied to the promise and failure of

[10] Setha Low, *Behind the Gates: Life, Security, and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
[11] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011): 1.

American life. However, safety, comfort, or other positive adjectives generally associated with the culturally dominant idea of home fail to take into account that home is constantly *becoming* rather than ever *being* some fixed entity. Although social structures necessarily impact the levels of precarity experienced by particular bodies, even the most powerful human in a social system remains subject to Butler's primary vulnerability—despite all his or her work to the contrary, death, sickness, or bad luck could at any moment alter the psychic or material landscape of any given subject. However, in America, with our Dream of equality and prosperity through respectability and hard work, the failure of ascension to negate the immutable facts of mortality and chance actually might *precipitate* a sense of precarity for those who anticipated that a finish line of security and stability would appear somewhere along the way. In turn, a subject's desire for this promised safety prompts a reiteration of home and a redoubling of efforts to keep precarity at bay. Unfortunately, this entrenchment in necessarily unsuccessful practices of home produces further precarity in that each failure to achieve permanent safety reminds the home-maker that no available strategies can actually eliminate the contingency of human life in the way that was promised. Rather than allowing a subject to try other ways of doing home, however, this cruel optimism traps them in a cycle of promise and disappointment, perpetuating the precarity home intended to keep away through the very practice of home. In this way, home both ameliorates risk and is a risky practice itself, even for those who sit in secure social positions.

Although home does not always produce a static space, it is necessarily geographical.[12] Even homes that actively push back against traditional ideas of territory retain a spatial dimension, if only on the scale of the body. The geography of home might be a wide network of individuals, a hierarchical and rigidly-defined material space of domination, a disruptive collective of people taking up space, a zone of nurturance, or any number of other forms. In each case, however, home serves to link an individual to a broader geography and its attendant ideologies and logics. As the following chapters will show, the geographies home creates reflect Butler's categories of response to precarity: some homes produce geographies of domination rooted in control and the pursuit of mastery, while others engage strategies of connection and care that produce flexible geographies capable of "staying with the thought of corporeal vulnerability,"[13] to borrow Butler's terms. This dissertation views home as the geographical product of a practice which seeks to mediate the experience of precarity.

One of the primary mechanisms by which home accomplishes its task is by producing a threshold between the self or the intimate sphere and society. Much of the existing literature on home works out of the private/public dichotomy first articulated in western philosophical constructions of the individual and the public sphere. This idea that the public and private spheres can be understood separately, despite the myriad relations

[12] I root my understanding of geography and geographical knowledge in Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, eds., *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007). This text seeks a way to reemphasize the spatial within black studies, without reinscribing systems of dominance onto the landscape. The authors argue that an examination of black geographies holds the potential to "move us away from territoriality, the normative practice of staking a claim to place," and toward a recognition that one can produce geography by existing in space without necessarily needing to claim it. See page 5 of the text for the discussion I cite here.

[13] Butler, Precarious Life, 29.

that exist between the two, informs much of our contemporary understanding of the role of the individual in society and of the relationships between the individual citizen and the wider economic structure of the nation/world. However, scholars, particularly those who engage the question of intimacy in relations of power, repeatedly mark sites where these two ostensibly static and separate categories bleed into one another, not simply through a process of relation but in a blending that troubles the work of separating these spheres. In order to produce a definition of home that can bear this indeterminacy, I use the term "threshold" to describe the role of home in a social world. Rather than thinking of home as a thickly-bounded space of privacy within a larger public, the concept of the threshold recognizes how a social world and a personal self or intimate domain—the public and the private, the common and the intimate—necessarily interact through a permeable boundary. For those homes which seek mastery over precarity, this threshold is a space of policing, where interested agents get territorial and conflict with forces or actors that would infringe upon the self. Other homes treat the threshold differently, managing social and human flows through less conflictual means. The concept of the threshold also allows for the fact that home necessarily cultivates selfhood in both relation to and separation from the social world beyond it. This definition intends to recognize the existence of the individual self and its need for regeneration, as well as the impossibility of separating it or its intimate relations from the world in which it exists.

As objects, bodies, and spaces cross this threshold, they become incorporated into the self. The material objects that home arranges come to be experienced as a part of the self, and any threat to their loss thereby becomes a threat of violation to the self. The

blurring of the line between the individual self, often imagined as a human body, and the inanimate objects, other selves, or physical spaces that a home engages sheds light on the weight of private property law in the U.S., particularly in homes where the threshold between self and society demands policing or legal protection. In practice, this becomes a question of attachment—to what things will one become so attached that the loss of that thing constitutes a violation of the self? Children and houses are two mainstream answers to this question. Recognizing this potential for loss, some homes will attach fewer objects to the central self and others will attempt to secure the things attached to the self in the hope of staving off such a loss. In extreme behavior like hoarding, this attachment between object and self within the home becomes disproportionately unhealthy for the person or persons within the home, and the proliferation of attachments to objects which means to mediate a sense of precarity only serves to deepen the fear of object loss and violation of the self. However, the attachment of self to body, object, or space is part of all homes, no matter their relationship to precarity. It is merely a matter of scale.

Home also serves as a means of social reproduction, even in my loose definition. This aspect of home is one of the most compelling and widely-studied facets of the concept found in the existing literature. My research supports this contention. Social reproduction to my thinking means both the physical act of producing more living humans to live within a social system and the indoctrination of existing humans into a social world. By taking both of these senses of "social reproduction" into account, my definition allows home to be a locus of beginning without necessarily being a point of

origin.[14] Further, I argue that social reproduction is also a means of mediating precarity. "Social" here does not imply dominant sociality but rather reflects the myriad overlapping social systems within any given space. Homes seek to create and broaden social worlds through intimate relations—a social world grows larger through the intimate seduction of the home. This does not always occur sexually, as the following chapters will show. For example, the seduction of the intimate might take the form of receiving care, acceptance, or support from someone who lives according to a different ideology when the ideology by which one lives would not allow for that care, acceptance or support. The seduction of the intimate might also be a promise of power or domination. For example, a particular home might implicitly promise a son that if he defers to patriarchal authority, someday he will be a powerful patriarch. I also see magazines like Dwell, which promise social dominance through the production of particular kinds of spaces, as an intimate seduction, as much as the smell of familiar cooking or the promise of love between individuals. Engaging with the intimate sphere of a home draws an agent into its sociality, which broadens the possibility of social perpetuity for members of that social world.[15] Home is how people bring others into their cultural world, and homes are just as apt to indoctrinate an inhabitant into an oppressive ideology as a liberating one. In other words, home must been seen as a neutral object

[14] This point grows out of work done in the excellent Ahmed, et al., *Uprootings/Regroundings*, which centers migrant, immigrant, and refugee homes in order to disrupt the "naturalization of homes as origins, and the romanticization of mobility as travel, transcendence, and transformation." By looking first at homes that move, these authors seek to understand how homes begin and begin again, and how this practice itself produce one's sense of home. See the introduction to that text for more.

[15] The intimacy of home also provides space for the sharing of secrets or the passing-along of knowledge. Indeed, one of the primary ways home reproduces the ideologies of a social system is through the practice of social instruction.

rather than an instrument of comfort or good—the sociality that is reproduced can just as easily be one of domination, oppression, and violence as safety, support, and love.

Often, the practice I have described here produces a stereotypical or mainstream space or set of relationships out of a similarly rote set of objects. However, while my definition of home clearly applies to those spaces already recognized and marked as homes in the U.S., it also provides space for alternative homes not currently recognized as such. A homeless encampment, for example, would signify a home within my framework, troubling the term "homeless" itself. Along the same line, I define home as a practice rather than a tangible object, so that persons need not produce a static material result to prove the presence of a home. Conversely, according to my thinking, a person might not necessarily feel "at home" simply because of the presence of particular kinds of objects in a particular kind of space. Rather, people can and do feel "at home" in a panoply of situations and spaces, and this definition provides space, and perhaps eventually protection, to alternative forms of home.

Above all, however, home mediates an individual's sense of precarity. Home works against anxiety and fear but does not necessarily arrive at safety or security. In fact for some, home might ward off precarity by inviting or invoking a known discomfort—an abusive partner, perhaps, to recreate the familiar dangers of an abusive childhood, or a social and/or physical isolation that provides a sense of control to an otherwise vulnerable subject. Home seeks to ameliorate the precarity that inheres in being human. Home is more incantation than action, however, in that a sense of safety might never arrive, but the practice of home continues. The only product necessarily produced by the practice of

home is a self, connected to a social world through ideology and intimate ties, and more or less able to manage the contingency of human existence.

AFRO-PESSIMISM AND SLAVERY

Home's relationship to precarity makes it a salient category of analysis for the history of plantation slavery and the lived experience of enslavement. As I discuss in more depth in the following chapter, the practice of home among the enslaved affirms that despite varied and powerful forms of oppression, the enslaved still found ways to mediate the precarity these oppressions precipitated. An examination of plantation homes also reveals a deeper experience of precarity for slave-masters, slave-mistresses, and other powerful agents than a totalizing narrative might allow. By complicating both the position of master and the position of slave, then, an analysis of home on the plantation complicates Afro-pessimist assertions of the constancy and totality of racial oppression.

The term "Afro-pessimism" emerged in Frank B. Wilderson III's provocative text *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structures of U.S. Antagonisms* (2010). Wilderson coined this term to describe the shared assumptions of a set of scholars he lists in the text: "Hortense Spillers, Ronald Judy, David Marriott, Saidiya Harman, Achille Mbembe, Frantz Fanon, Kara Keeling, Jared Sexton, Joy James, Lewis Gordon, Goerge Yancy, and Orlando Patterson."[16] These scholars, he writes, are "theorists of structural positionality"[17] who "share Fanon's insistence that, though Blacks are indeed sentient beings, the structure of the entire world's semantic field…is sutured by anti-Black

[16] Frank B. Wilderson, III, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structures of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010).
[17] Ibid., 58.

solidarity."[18] Blackness for Wilderson then is not a "variously and unconsciously interpolated identity"[19] but a "position…predicated on modalities of accumulation and fungibility."[20] Wilderson asserts that the Human comes into being through the murder of "the Black, forging a symbiosis between the political ontology of Humanity and the social death of Blacks."[21] The foundation of Wilderson's theory is the premise that the Black cannot be Human—cannot even *be*—within the cultural constructions of western modernity, and that this immutable fact can only be undone or altered via a radical break with history.

One of Wilderson's central theoretical constructions in the text is that of a "Master/Slave dichotomy,"[22] in which all persons (minus native people) fall into one of the two categories. This theorization grows out of the contention that "the Black…is always already positioned as Slave."[23] He roots himself in Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death*, arguing that because the status of slave bore a social dishonor and natal alienation that exceeded labor function, the Slave is actually "an anti-Human"[24] against which the Master/Human "establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity."[25] Wilderson's return to Fanonian ontology, then, emerges from what he sees as the fundamental inability of the state or civil society to offer real emancipation to black subjects. Because the "imaginary of the state and civil society is parasitic on the Middle

[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., 21.
[22] Ibid., 11. Wilderson also discusses the Settler/Savage dichotomy, and often refers to the White position as Master/Settler.
[23] Ibid., 7.
[24] Ibid., 11.
[25] Ibid.

Passage," none of the structures that organize the world in the present could even exist without the Slave. As Wilderson succinctly puts it: "No slave, no world."[26] For Wilderson, the infrastructural involvement of slavery in the ideological construction(s) of modernity produces a social grammar that restricts all of us to the category of Master or Slave, and the antagonism between these categories cannot resolve without the obliteration of one of them.

Many of the other scholars on this list share Wilderson's belief that the foundational violence of slavery has an afterlife that haunts the post-Emancipation world. Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* is one such text, which examines how the relationship between pleasure and terror that was present in structures of desire for both white and black people within the system of slavery persisted beyond the temporal endpoint of Emancipation. Patterson, too, defines slavery into a social process rather than a historical peculiarity in order to understand why contemporary social structures register the after-effects of an institution that has ostensibly disappeared.[27] Additionally, Hortense Spillers' canonical "Mama's Baby/Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" describes how the conflict between property and kinship in slave communities, and the idea that that condition of the child follows the condition of the mother, both haunt late-20th century representations of black motherhood.[28] However, these scholars, even in their shared recognition of the impact of slavery, differ from Wilderson in their suggestions for

[26] Ibid.
[27] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982).
[28] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby/Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17:2 (Summer 1987): 64-81.

how one might lessen the impact of this history on the present. Hartman, for example, frames her project's intervention as one of relative hope "that the instances of insurgency and contestation narrated herein and the relentless proliferation of small acts of resistance perhaps offer some small measure of encouragement."[29] Even as she writes about the profound circumscription of slave agency, she seeks a reiteration of historical resistance for the purpose of shoring up a future.

Spillers, for her part, rejects the label of Afro-pessimist. Her panel talk from the Future of American Studies Institute at Dartmouth in June of 2015 critiques Wilderson's "absoluteness of posture,"[30] which she recognizes as seductive but also finds limiting for analytical possibilities. By investing in violent solutions and trafficking in ahistorical categories of being, she argues, Wilderson's theory produces a totalizing orthodoxy of its own. In response to Wilderson's provocation, Spillers questions to what extent "Slave" or "Black" can be considered ontological, as those are not categories one can be borne into, according to her thinking. Rather, Spillers suggests a recognition that there "was never a Slave,"[31] which is to say that even during the era of enslavement, this category of being was a construction of power, meant to refuse the humanity of a being which never ceased to be human. Spillers encourages scholars to recognize that "at any given moment, all the strategies of possibility are available at once…[and] the potential for something

[29] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997): 14.
[30] Hortense Spillers, "Afro Pessimism and the Elders: Critical Transformations" (plenary paper, Futures of American Studies Institute, Dartmouth College, June 24, 2015).
[31] Spillers, "Afro Pessimism and the Elders"

transformative is really quite rich because you have a whole precedent…to pull from."[32] Like Hartman, she suggests that rather than seeing the foundational violence of slavery as only productive of negative relations, interested parties might also seek the strategies of possibility employed by those living within that oppressive system in order to find more tools for liberation in the present. Echoing Lorde, she rejects Wilderson's claim for the necessity of a violent break as a reproduction of the very structures of power he ostensibly seeks to unmake. Similar arguments against Afro-pessimism, which seek possibility within the violent history of slavery without denying the reality of its violence, now populate Black Studies scholarship.

In particular, Katherine McKittrick's "Plantation Futures"[33] serves as a model for my own work in this dissertation. Her geographical/historical/literary approach to the resonance between plantation slavery and present-day urbanity allows her to affirm the productive and difficult claims of Afro-pessimism while resisting its movement toward totality or reductive categorization. Where Spillers claims that "there never was a Slave," McKittrick notes that the ideological construction of a space as "unlivable" does not negate the very real presence of life in such a space. Rather, the terms of oppression which structure perceptions of the space engender the dismissals of life within such spaces, and not the other way around. Her essay then seeks evidence of that life—not just survival, but thriving—within the reality of oppressive histories and within the later literary productions of black writers. Like Fred Moton, McKittrick mines black artistic

[32] Spillers, "Afro Pessimism and the Elders"
[33] Katherine McKittrick, "Plantation Futures" *small axe*, vol. 42 (Nov. 2003): 1-15.

production for evidence of radical blackness, even (or especially) in places one does not expect it to be.

This dissertation enters happily into this intellectual fray, taking seriously the provocations of Afro-pessimist scholarship without losing sight of the historical realities of both black humanity within enslavement and black economic and social ascension in the 20th century. While I find it impossible to deny the perpetuation of anti-black violence, systemic racism, and the broad devaluation of black life, the perpetual presence of black resistance and black life throughout history and into the present confounds the reduction of black persons to ontological impossibility. My dissertation interrogates the claims of Afro-pessimism by examining how black artists and writers in the 20th century manipulate or reflect the world of the plantation in their work. At core, this dissertation suggests that the dialectic between the quest for justice and equality in the 1960s and the invocation of strategies of life in un-freedom provide the terms and means for black thriving in the present day and beyond.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Chapter One, "Dominion and Fugitivity: Theorizing the Plantation Home," provides the theoretical framework and historical background for the rest of the dissertation. Drawing from archeological texts on the geography and material arrangement of plantations as well as from the deep historiography of slavery and plantation culture, I theorize plantation homes as existing on a spectrum between dominion and fugitivity. By dominion, I mean a sense of home aligned with white supremacist patriarchy that relies heavily on control, command, and property ownership,

and, by fugitivity, I mean a sense of home aligned with blackness that antagonizes dominion through its refusal to fully succumb to its logics. In this chapter, I articulate a subtle difference between fugitivity and resistance, arguing that the fugitive antagonizes dominion by absenting itself from power rather than through resistant engagement. While dominion can and does enact violence on unruly bodies and subjects within the reach of its power, the fugitive home becomes a present absence always under threat of that violence but invisible to those that might enact it and absent from its geographies of control. I argue that all persons who inhabited the plantation south constructed their home through some set of practices on the spectrum between these two polar absolutes. In other words, it was a rare and perhaps impossible subject who found him- or herself inhabiting true and complete dominion or fugitivity. These were ideal forms sought with varying success by many different kinds of people who borrowed spaces, objects, and practices from one another in an attempt to create the affective experience of being at home.

Chapter Two, "Possibility and Loss in the Underground: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," looks at the protagonist's underground home in *Invisible Man* as both as a metaphor for the novel's role in its historical moment and as a means of describing the limitations of the fugitive home for black liberation. Noting the resonances between the novel's fugitive characters, the underground home of the protagonist, and the work on fugitivity in Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (2013), this chapter seeks to place Ellison in historical context and to understand why his vision for the possibilities of the fugitive home fails to understand its connection to the creation of a social world. Ellison's depiction of the fugitive home

emphasizes the sacrifice it demands, which he frames as an alienation from the broader national community or shared social world. However, Ellison's novel itself masks the potentially subversive nature of some of its characters with the strategic invocation of stereotype and subtle linguistic play. Because Ellison employs fugitive strategies himself, I argue that his novel recognizes their possibility, despite the fact that the text and its author remain invested in racially-inclusive democracy and the integrationist politics that held sway over the black public at mid-century. *Invisible Man* worries over what is lost through an embrace of the fugitive home, without completely abandoning its ideologies and practices.

In Chapter Three, "Fugitive Domestic: Toni Morrison's Pedagogy for Freedom," I describe how Toni Morrison uses descriptions of home in *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, and *Home* to map a path to thriving in her fiction. This chapter argues that Morrison's fiction refuses to define freedom in terms that would reify the totality of white supremacist, capitalist, or patriarchal ideologies. Invoking Katherine McKittrick's concept of "plot-in-plantation," I map the spaces in Morrison's novels that cultivate the extant humanity already running rogue within old and powerful systems. The same ghosts that animate Afro-pessimist scholarship—the inescapability of violent history, perpetual racial antagonism, and the residue of impossible choice—haunt these novels, but Morrison's fiction remains ambivalent about their inescapability or impact. Primarily, I assert that Morrison's writing has always focused on practical, livable politics that would allow for survival, thriving, or fully-fledged freedom depending on a person's access to social and economic resources. This chapter then continues the project begun in Chapter Two of

locating and describing the possibility of fugitivity while recognizing its limitations in order to trouble scholarly assumptions about the impact and/or totality of dominant forms of power.

This emphasis on indeterminacy persists in Chapter Four, "Subtle Subversion and Fugitive Threat: Carrie Mae Weems' *American Icons*." In each of the photographs in this series, racist objects—ashtrays, salt-and-pepper shakers, thermometers, figurines—appear in mundane domestic still-life scenes. This chapter argues that the images in Weems' *American Icons* series depict the indeterminacy of power relations within the mundane domesticity that descends from plantation slavery, undermining the totality of dominant power by indexing the possibility of subversion. Invoking the tropes of the still life genre while using playful compositional techniques to resist definitive readings, the photographs in this series animate overdetermined racist objects in order to encourage the viewer to inhabit the uncanny space created by the repressed history of the violences and vulnerabilities of domestic slavery. This series pushes back against the image of domestic servants as docile human-objects existing within a scene of total power on the part of the master. Instead, these photographs imply resistance, absence, and threat through their indeterminate arrangement of racist objects. Using Darieck Scott's work on abjection and Jared Sexton's concept of social life as social death, this chapter asserts that the playful indeterminacy of Weems' images positions the social and ideological reality of blackness as never wholly subjugated even in its subjection.

The conclusion of my dissertation discusses the cultural context for the rise of Afro-pessimism, noting the proliferation of "post-racialist" discourse and the attendant

racial backlash against the election and presidency of Barack Obama as inciting incidents for a re-evaluation of the possibilities for black existence within the U.S. I suggest that my dissertation charts a historical trajectory as black people move away from the lived history of slavery and toward a historical or theoretical reimagining of its structures. I also address how my dissertation uses an exploration of human practice to disrupt the totality of Wildersonian Afro-pessimism. Although Wilderson rejects historical epistemology as it is too ingrained in the ideologies of western modernity to be a way to disrupt his theoretical constructions, I use his discussions of home in *Red, White, and Black* to point to the way his theoretical constructions shore up the very power structures he wishes to undo. I conclude by asserting the saliency of home as a frame through which to see black thinkers grappling with the best ways to seek radical black freedom, from the time of slavery through the present.

Chapter One—Dominion and Fugitivity: Theorizing the Plantation Home

The purpose of this chapter is to map out the continuum of homes that existed in plantation slavery, primarily during the 19th century. Drawing from historiography and archaeology, I theorize a spectrum of home between two ideals forms that I term dominion and the fugitive home. Within the system of the plantation, these two ideals existed in tension with one another, and various actors on any given plantation oscillated between the two to ensure survival or thriving for themselves. Each of these ideals attaches to certain ideologies and generally produces similar material arrangements. On historical plantations, their material and social geography comprised the various products of individual striving toward either or both ideals, and an examination of this geography reveals their antagonistic and dialectical relationship to each other. This map lays the groundwork for the rest of the dissertation. I contend, as mentioned in the introduction, that the homes that existed in plantation slavery continue to resonate into the present, in line with Afro-pessimist thinking that sees the roots of present-day social formations in the history of U.S. slavery.

However, the project of this chapter is tricky as it engages with two conceptual forms—the plantation and the home—that cannot be easily separated from the ideals, ideologies, and nostalgia that surround and inform them.[34] Home has also been the object

[34] An excellent example of historical work that aims to describe the variety of landscapes and social arrangements included within the umbrella term of "plantation" is Rhys Isaac,

of an idealizing discourse for most of Western history. Since the Greek and Roman writings on the household, thinkers have worked to described how best to arrange, inhabit, and make use of a home, particularly for those in the cultural and social position to determine how the home is ordered. Throughout the late-18th, 19th and 20th centuries, prescriptive home literature and programming strove to create ideal citizens in the growing U.S. The influence of so-called family values on the political landscape in the late 20th and early 21st century indicates that home remains a central ideal to which national subjects are expected to strive. At present, however, much of the scholarship on the home actively works to undermine or complicate the relationship between the ideal middle-class or national home and the lived experiences of people in a world where the attainment of this ideal grows increasingly less possible.[35] Even more radical disruptions of the "domestic" maintain that home must equal comfort, safety, or any number of other positive attachments. This powerful ideal colors how people view and describe their own experiences, and filters which narratives get passed around. This was no less true in the 19th century.

During the antebellum period, prescriptive writings on the inchoate bourgeois home came mostly from Northern women who were, more often than not, also abolitionists. In the South, however, another prescriptive literature circulated among masters regarding the ideal way to manage the plantation household. The fact that in the

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The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790 (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

[35] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Ahmed, et al., eds., *Uprootings/Regroundings*.

North, prescriptive home literature was addressed to women while in the South, the literature of the household was addressed to masters speaks to the regional sense of who was responsible for the space of the home. In the North, where the ideology of separate spheres dominated, women were tasked with working on the ideal home. In the South, with its intrenched patriarchy and paternalism, men were expected to control all aspects of the plantation, from the fields to the living room.[36] In both cases, however, prescriptive writing on the home and its management tells us less about the home as it was and more about the home as elites imagined it should be.

Indeed, the fact that people have precious little access to homes that they do not inhabit regularly makes any attempt to understand and describe homes as they are actually lived in very tricky. Even among a person's closest friends and family, home retains a performative aspect in that living rooms, kitchens, and the other social spaces of the home often serve, as Elizabeth Alexander describes, as a means of performing the self.[37] The performativity of home, as well as the performativity of first-person historical accounts like diaries, oral histories, and letters, necessarily complicates any historical research on older versions of home-life. Failure to fulfill the ideal was recorded far less often than success at the endeavor. This demands reading the archival sources and scholarship of slavery against the grain, and seeking moments when a person's self-reported sense of home belies itself or gives something away. For example, as many

[36] For more on the agro-industrial aspects of plantation slavery see Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Viking Press, 1985).
[37] Elizabeth Alexander, *The Black Interior* (St. Paul, MN: Greywolf Press, 2004).

historians of the culture of mistresses have noted, slaves were often blamed for domestic shortcomings in the South. In these moments of reported frustration with house slaves, we can read the failure of Southern women to perform home properly, often due to their inability to coerce their slaves into supporting the domestic endeavor to the extent they demanded. The Southern mistress' practice of home, then, included an assemblage of bodies expected to act as extensions of her own self, but which were unruly and difficult more often than not. A mistress' sense of home then is characterized not as a living ideal, but rather as a striving toward this ideal marked by persistent, frustrating failures to reach it.[38]

The plantation itself is a similarly idealized form, beyond the fact that it was also a home. Many of the plantation histories written since the 1970s focus on challenging this image by complicating the "Big House" plantation ideal propagated by the Lost Cause crusaders following the end of the Civil War and examining previously ignored variables like region, gender, time-period, or class.[39] Many historians, as well as black studies scholars and archeologists, have also worked hard to expand our understanding of the black experience of slavery and the interactions between the white and black worlds that

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[38] Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2008); Kirsten E. Wood, *Masterful Women: Slaveholding Widows from the American Revolution to the Civil War,* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2004).

[39] Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1998); James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York: Knopf, 1982); Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995); Walter Johnson, *The River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2013).

would have overlapped and mingled in the confined space of the plantation.[40] I take these interventions seriously, drawing evidence from a broad historiography in order to locate shared ideological attachments rather than a universal set of lived experiences. Based on extensive historical evidence, there is no question that few plantation dwellers, black or white, inhabited the ideal imagined plantation, just as few northern women of the time maintained a perfect bourgeois home. I contend, however, that this ideal still informed the lived experience of Antebellum plantation inhabitants, influencing the way they talked, wrote, thought about, and made their own plantation homes.[41]

However, I maintain that the plantation presents an interesting place to begin an examination of the American home, in that its relationship to contemporary northern descriptions of home as well as present-day conceptions of home in the U.S. has been the subject of debate. The primary reason that scholars work to separate the plantation home from home as we understand it today is due to the fact that the plantation home served as a economic unit of production rather than a separate sphere of escape from the economic and political world. This idea of "home" as separate from economic production stems

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[40] Eugene Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: White and Black Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: WW Norton and Co., 1985); Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925 (*New York: Vintage Books, 1976); John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford UP, 1972); Thomas J. Durant and J. David Knottnerus, eds., *Plantation Society and Race Relations: The Origins of Inequality* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999).

[41] John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

from late 18th and early 19th century Northern writers, and it continues to inform theories of home today. However, recent scholarship on the role and nature of the home in the U.S. has indicated that the false and idealized dichotomy between home and wider social or economic world never really existed in the way prescriptive literature or elite self-presentation might indicate.[42] Bodies and objects—domestic laborers, citizens, books, newspapers, currency, wealth—circulated both within and without the home, creating discursive, intellectual, and economic circuits connecting these ostensibly "separate spheres." Along these same lines, much of the Antebellum work done to separate the bourgeois "home" from the plantation "household" intended to distance the North and its reputation as an abolitionist space from the slave South. Abolitionist writers mobilized the ideal of privacy in the home as an argument against the culture of slavery, attempting to deny proper womanhood to Southern women who engaged enslaved labor in the creation and management of their domestic sphere. For example, Thavolia Glymph offers

[42] Too many recent texts on working-class and poor white women, women of color, and/or rural women have made this argument for me to be able to provide an exhaustive list here. In my own thinking, the following texts have been most influential on this point: Maria Kaika, "Interrogating the Geographies of the Familiar: Domesticating Nature and Constructing the Autonomy of the Modern Home." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 28.2 (June 2004): 265-286; Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Republican America,* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*, New York: Vintage Books, 1990; Amy Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity." *American Literature* 70, no. 3 (1998): 581-606; Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992; Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism,* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. For a discussion of more recent blurring between the economic/political/social world and the home, see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era,* New York: Basic Books, 1988.

evidence from the letters and diaries of Northern women living in the South who critiqued the detrimental effect of slavery on their ability to maintain a proper American home that would produce good Republican citizens. While Glymph never explicitly argues that a Northern critique of the South existed within the ideology of domesticity, the evidence she presents reveals that Southern women sought the same kind of domesticity prescribed by Northern writers and that Northern women often criticized the failure of the plantation system to allow this kind of domestic space and practice.[43] The political intention of prescriptive home writing necessarily demanded an emphasis on the separation of economics and the domestic in Northern homes and an overstatement of the economic function of their Southern counterparts.

While it remains true that the nature of plantation slavery and the social and spatial structure of plantations in relation to one another did produce a sphere of home that looked different in many cases from similarly elite homes in the north, the fact remains that the plantation still served as a home, nostalgically, ideologically, habitually, and materially, for those Americans, white and black, who grew up in and inhabited the antebellum south. The space of the plantation and its surrounding area made up "home" for disparate sorts of people with attitudes and approaches toward various objects that were markedly different. The enslaved black body, understood to be paradoxically both

[43] See in particular Glymph's chapter on household management and the difficulty of willful slaves (*Out of the House of Bondage*, New York: Cambridge UP, 2008: 63-96). Here, Glymph draws extensively from Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's *Within the Plantation Household*. Although both writers argue for a distinction between the plantation "household" and the bourgeois "home," their evidence belies this division.

human and object in the antebellum South,[44] serves as one of the most obvious examples of the layered nature of material realities on the plantation that complicate any reading of the homes it comprised. Additionally, recent archeological literature on plantation grounds indicates that even the architecture of the planation—its physical orientation and purposeful design—offered different geographies to the different sorts of people who moved through the space of the plantation.[45]

My conception of the plantation home as a set of overlapping and connected assemblages borrows heavily from Dell Upton's seminal work on the white and black landscapes of slavery. Although Upton's archaeological work is grounded in the material structure of the plantation, his assertion that "an apparently unified landscape may actually be composed of several fragmentary ones, some sharing common elements of the larger assemblage"[46] inspires my discussion of the plantation in the pages that follow. Scholars of space and place have long debated the definition and relationship between these two forms, with most agreeing that space is physical and material while place is cultural and social, without being so easily disconnected in reality as they are in theory. Scholars of landscape often focus on the relationship between space and place by

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[44] This idea is generally referred to as the chattel principle, and was most notably articulated by William Goodell in *The American slave code in theory and practice: its distinctive features shown by its statutes, judicial decisions, and illustrative facts*, (New York: American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, 1853).

[45] Theresa A. Singleton, ed., *The Archaeology of Slavery and Plantation Life* (Orlando: Academic Press, 1985); Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg, *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2010), Vlach, *Back of the Big House*.

[46] Dell Upton, "White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," *Places* 2:2 (1985): 59-72. Reprinted in Ellis and Ginsburg, *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation*.

examining how people create physical spaces with the intention of performing some kind of social or cultural function, from the reinforcement of a dominant person's power to the altering of "deviant" behavior among marginal groups. Upton's intervention in his essay is to argue that any given landscape may be perceived and used differently by different bodies that inhabit it. In the case of the 18th century plantation, Upton argues, the grand vistas intended to impress invited visitors to the plantation would not have even been seen by the enslaved people that worked in the plantation's fields. At the same time, many of the barriers to crossing that would have informed a visitor of his or her proximity or intimacy to the family would not have been barriers to enslaved people at all. Rather, enslaved people would have seen these intimate, familial spaces as spaces of labor or of the strange intimate labor that characterized so much master/slave interaction on the plantation. The barriers that existed for enslaved people, then, were far more social or cultural than material or visible. Upton uses this different way of looking at the landscape to argue for the existence of multiple geographies—for visitors, white laborers, masters, mistresses, black slaves, and so on—within the same plantation landscape.

Upton also contends that the unified landscape is composed of fragmentary landscapes that share common elements, and that the plantation as a whole exists through this assemblage of elements. This framework allows me to map the homes I see co-existing within the material and social landscape of the plantation without needing to wholly separate them from one another. As scholars of the plantation have extensively noted, race, gender, economic status (particularly for non-elite whites) and region all impacted how people experienced the plantation regime, and it is difficult to offer a

general overview of the realities of slavery without erasing its particularities or flattening the complicated relationships it produced. As mentioned above, historians and archaeologists continue to debate to what extent the "Big House" form existed in reality and to what extent it merely served as an aspirational or nostalgic ideal. The intimate relationships between people on the plantation, perhaps most infamously the "Mammy" relationship between white children and enslaved women, have also been questioned and often deemed historically inaccurate, or at the very least far more complex and fraught than earlier historians had assumed them to be.[47] In my project, then, the difficulty of offering a coherent description of the home(s) that existed on the plantation is doubly complicated by the fact that neither "home" nor "the plantation" exists as a simple or unified object of study. For this reason, then, it helps to understand both home and the plantation as potentially fragmentary and composed of a shared set of elements.[48] The plantation as a place comprises these elements, although not necessarily as a unified whole, and home is a practice that orients these elements toward or away from one another and connects them in a loose network. Just as one plantation landscape might contain multiple fragmentary landscapes, a single "plantation home" might actually

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[47] See Diane Roberts, *The Myth of Aunt Jemima: Representations of Race and Region* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South (*New York: WW Norton and Co., 1985); Patricia A. Turner, *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994).

[48] My approach also borrows elements of actor-network theory and Bruno Latour's work on the social. In Latour's terminology, my work seeks to trace the "associations" between shared elements that produce both home and the plantation as real objects that were historically lived and experienced. See Latour, *Reassembling the Social*.

consist of multiple competing or coexisting homes that draw on the same well of elements.

However, I do not wish to offer so many particularities of the plantation that it ceases to be a category of space. In this chapter, my purpose is to offer some broad categories of home that might complicate the notion of a unified plantation home without rendering the plantation meaningless as a social unit. Katherine McKittrick's excellent work on "plantation futures" offers that the logic and schemas which the historical fact of plantation slavery produced persist in present-day social, cultural, and economic forms. Because ways of life codified in the plantation past still resonate in the present, it is necessary that the plantation remain a functional unit of historical comparison and cultural analysis. Plantation slavery and the plantation as a material and cultural form were deliberately constructed systems of oppression and racialization that served to dehumanize black bodies and turn persons into property. The U.S. in particular and the western world more broadly have not yet been able to fully correct or undo the impact of this foundational violence. However, as McKittrick reminds us, perhaps the best way to work through the persistence of plantation schemas in order to imagine a different future is to "seek out secretive histories"[49] of the plantation that provide a record of black life, rather than a rehearsal of black death. In other words, McKittrick calls on scholars to look at the form of the plantation in new and different ways, in order to locate the spaces of resistance already present on the plantation that might be harnessed for the purposes of

[49] Katherine McKittrick, "Plantation Futures" *small axe*, vol. 42 (Nov. 2003): 11.

black liberation in the present. It is with this in mind that I pursue this project of mapping.

PLANTATION HOMES

In the introduction to this dissertation, I defined home as a practice with the intention of opening up the category without stripping it of all shared meaning. This chapter's discussion of the forms of home on the plantation will attempt a similar move. The geographical or physical space of the plantation and its assemblage of objects, relationships, bodies, buildings, and spaces were shared and used to make home by a variety of people up and down the social hierarchy. Everyone from the field slaves to the master moved through the same physical landscape, with more or less power to alter that landscape and/or orient the bodies and objects within it toward or away from one another. At times, different practices of home conflicted with one another; at other times, multiple homes existed simultaneously in shared space without issue. However, due to the vast variations between the material realities of different plantations and the impact of plantation and domestic ideals on the historical record of plantation life, it is difficult to specifically locate these conflicts or to predict which persons' enactments of home would have conflicted with one another. It seems likely that slave practices of home would have conflicted with the master's sense of home, but how did different slave homes interact with one another? What about the interaction between the master and his wife or children? Did their practices of home conflict or coincide?

In an attempt to provide a model through which to think about these questions without essentializing or deadening the plantation as both a lived and ideal space, I

propose a framework for categorizing plantation home(s) along a spectrum between two ideals, each of which attaches to a primarily imagined but potentially real subject position in the geography of the plantation south. At one end of the spectrum lies dominion, characterized by a total control of space, relationships, bodies, and self, and ideologically informed by the patriarchy, paternalism, and white supremacy of slavery. At the other lies fugitivity or the fugitive home, characterized by absence, illegibility, and indeterminacy, and informed by a refusal of the ideological and physical oppressions of slavery and paternalism, as well as by a desire to cultivate alternative socialities and knowledge. Those who sought to build fugitive homes were not necessarily enslaved nor necessarily legally categorized as fugitives, but rather absented themselves from power in myriad ways, regardless of whether these strategies made them legally free.

Both these forms of home were in many ways unreachable ideals, but the tension between them and different agents' movement toward one or the other provides a means of conceptualizing how different people found themselves at home on the plantation without attaching particular forms of home to particular bodies. While it seems safe to presume that the white masters of most plantations sought dominion, a skilled slave might also seek dominion of a sort as well. That same slave, however, might also engage in fugitive practices as a potential subject of the master's dominion. Similarly, a mistress might seek dominion over her domestic slaves, but might also become fugitive from her husband's home in an effort to resist his dominion over her. People moved between these two poles, accepting and rejecting different structures of power at different moments. A person need not be white to invest in white supremacy, just as a person need not be black

to reject or resist it. A similar statement can be made about gender and patriarchy. So while dominion might most often be practiced by white men, it was not practiced solely by white men, and while fugitive homes were predominantly black, white plantation inhabitants also engaged in fugitive practices.

Importantly, my research suggests that most historical actors did not solely engage in either form of home. If home, as I discussed in the introduction, at core mediates an individual's relationship to precarity, understood to be a person's recognition of their fundamental human vulnerability, power necessarily played a role in how persons came to feel at home in a system of oppression predicated on the imagination of one person's total power over everyone else within a particular geography. Recent work on forms of resistance and power within the plantation south, however, encourages a reading of the landscape that rejects both the totalizing power of the slave master and the total freedom from that power, which is often attached to the figure of the fugitive slave.[50] This scholarship encourages a nuanced understanding of how agency functioned within the system of slavery, making space for considerations of the relational nature of power. Plantation homes were a sphere in which both the assertion of power and resistance to that power played a role. Individual actors moved between the poles of the spectrum, at certain times seeking dominance over the landscape and at other times seeking to be free

[50] Many texts suggest this complexity, but most central to my thinking are Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999); Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*; Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia*.

from forms of domination. Although antagonistically intertwined, the polar ends of this spectrum also dialectally produce a panoply of individual homes and, more holistically, the shared geography of the plantation south.

This spectrum evokes the similar dialectical constructions of the relationship between whiteness and blackness in the U.S., and even more broadly, dialectical understandings of the general relationship between power and resistance.[51] My work enters into these conversations about the nature of power and the efficacy of resistance by offering the home as a space in which such power relationships were and are created, contested, enacted, and subverted. Rather than seeing dominion as a public act of care-taking, divorced from the "private" or "intimate" space of the home, I argue that dominion actually takes its root and draws strength from the intimate relationships that in part comprise the home. Similarly, I do not see the fugitive home as an exile from an intimate world that exists in an oppressive geography, but rather as an escape from oppression that works in part by creating and protecting an intimate world that can hide in plain sight amid the geography of oppression. As home is a means of incubating, sustaining, and reproducing cultural life, it serves as a critical battleground in the war between power and freedom.

DOMINION

I term the dominating form of home on the plantation "dominion" in order to emphasize the centrality of control and command to this sense of being at home. In

[51] Camp, *Closer to Freedom*; James Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 1990); James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985).

addition to seeking an absolute control, those engaged in this form of home practice also described themselves to other members of their social class as weighted by a sense of responsibility for those who fell within their sphere of control.[52] Dominion as a form of home correlates directly with the concept of mastery as it has been theorized in the literature on slavery and the plantation—dominion is only experienced by those who attempt to maintain and exert a total control over the space of their home and the persons and bodies within it, and for those who practice dominion, such control is necessary to produce the effects of home.[53] However, dominion also demands a sense of care-taking or concern for those people who are subjects within this total home, and it further demands the performance of gratitude on the part of those same subjects for this ostensible care-taking.[54] Dominion produces a threshold between self and society via practices of spatial arrangement and visual display. Notably, however, dominion allows the enslaved into even the most intimate spaces on the plantation, incorporating their bodies into the

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[52] For evidence of these self-descriptions among planter-class men, see Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of Planters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1987); Peter W. Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household: Families, Sex, and Law in the Nineteenth Century South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

[53] The presence of this control and its relationship to mastery is evident in the practices of record-keeping found in the archives of plantation masters. See Caitlin Rosenthal, "From Memory to Mastery: Accounting for Control in America, 1750-1880," *Enterprise & Society* 14:4 (2013): 732-748.

[54] Robert Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects: The Culture of Power in the South Carolina Low Country, 1740-1790* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1998). Olwell writes at length about how the provision of clothes, food, blankets, and other necessities was framed as benevolence on the part of the master, despite the fact that the labor of the slaves had actually paid for these goods. In turn, the slaves were expected to perform gratitude in a careful dance that maintained order and shored up the master's sense of power and righteousness.

selfhood of the master. The presence of slaves within the intimate sphere demands the construction and reproduction of a set of ideologies that ameliorate the sense of precarity such a presence might cause. Namely, dominion traffics in white supremacy, patriarchy, and traditional legal ownership, and serves to both ward off precarity and reproduce a social system through the perpetuation of these particular ideologies.

For those practicing dominion, a sense of control in part derived from spatially arranging the landscape to carefully control of what was or was not visible and to whom. The self that dominion protects and (re)produces relies on the control of bodies, objects, and spaces within its geography to recognize its existence and safety. In the absence of the actual ability to maintain this type of control, visual arrangement served as a proxy for power. The physical plantation landscape shored up dominion through visual logic and the production of sight lines that confirmed the location and direction of power. This meant different things for different planters, however.[55] In Vlach's *Back of the Big House*, he writes about inconsistencies in the archeological record about the location of work and slave buildings in relation to the "Big House" or master's residence on various plantations in various regions. On some plantations, "an ensemble of service structures, including several slave quarters, might flank the roadway leading to the mansion,"[56] which Vlach reads as a desire to "enhance the visitor's perception of the planter and his

[55] Although my argument here relies on Vlach's text, Isaac's *The Transformation of Virginia* discusses similar variations in the spatial arraignments of plantations as well.
[56] Vlach, *Back of the Big House*, 21.

estate."[57] Other planters mixed slave quarters among the work buildings in the yard, in particular for those slaves that worked in the kitchen, stable, or other specialized trades, combining "the personal lives and the domestic chores of his servants…into one seamless experience."[58] Still others chose to locate slave quarters far away from their residence, effectively hiding the existence of slaves and masking the master's reliance on their labor, allowing the master to see himself as the unequivocal source of all the wealth he held. In each case, the visibility (or invisibility) of the slave quarters or slave homes reinforced the planter's sense of power through the use of visual knowledge.[59] For some whose sense of power came from the possession and display of black bodies, the slave quarters needed to be highly visible not to the master or his family but to those arriving at the plantation to visit. For others whose sense of power came from the ability to surveil the activities of their slaves, the landscape had to allow them to keep a close watch on the work of their enslaved laborers. Still others needed to feel that they had made the land they owned productive, which demanded that they not confront the presence of slave labor that actually produced their livelihood. In all three cases the essential practice is the same, however: through spatial organization and the physical layout of the plantation, the planter intended to control the visibility and location of the enslaved in order to reaffirm

[57] Vlach, *Back of the Big House*, 21. Vlach also comments that having these small houses appear before one arrived at the planter's mansion made "the main house seem more impressive." (21)
[58] Vlach, *Back of the Big House*, 21.
[59] As I will talk about later, however, the visibility or invisibility of slave bodies also became a space of resistance for the enslaved, allowing them to produce fugitive homes within the space of the plantation.

his own power and sense of self. He positioned himself at the center of the world of the plantation by controlling who could see what and how those vistas were consumed.

Dell Upton's work on the archaeological record of 18th-century plantations also describes how the landscape served to define relationships and roles between the various people who lived on the plantation. He writes that the planter "intended that his landscape would be hierarchical, leading to himself at the center."[60] Because the plantation served not only as a home but also a space of commerce, education, and sometimes politics, planters designed their landscape as "a network of spaces"[61] where certain spaces held certain meanings. This allowed planters to move between roles as they moved through the physical space of their plantations. For example, as a planter moved from the fields, where he might be the head of economic production, into his house, where he might be head of a family or an important community figure receiving guests, the various "physical barriers that are also social barriers"[62] constructed in the landscape would ensure that only those who had permission to see him inhabiting a certain role could do so. In the ideal dominion, the plantation master held single authority over the plantation, legally and physically demarcating spatial boundaries within the plantation and determining what and who belonged in each space.

However, these spatial boundaries of the plantation applied less, if at all, to the enslaved. While certain slaves belonged in certain spaces—for example, those slaves tasked with domestic chores belonged in the house where slaves who worked in the field

[60] Ellis and Ginsberg, *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation*, 128.
[61] Ibid., 129.
[62] Ibid., 130.

did not—no one practicing dominion saw slaves as part of a social world beyond the threshold of master's plantation home. This fact reflects the impact of the chattel principle, which described the paradoxical legal status of slaves as simultaneously both human and object, on the practice of dominion.[63] This principle existed not just in law but also in social structures, informing how those inhabitants of the plantation who were not enslaved viewed those who were and impacting the slaves' perception of their own status as well.[64] While scholarship has uncovered the existence of extensive social worlds among the enslaved, some of which even connected the enslaved on multiple plantations,[65] the ideologies that attach to dominion prevented a recognition of those social worlds as such. Rather, within dominion, the slaves were either viewed as objects, like in the example above where their quarters were lined up as a display of the master's wealth, or as persons within an intimate sphere sometimes described as "our family, white and black."[66] In both cases, those practicing dominion saw the enslaved as part of

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[63] The chattel principle is noted in many texts. A description of it can be found in Olwell's *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects*, pg. 187-188. It is also discussed on pages 43-44 of this dissertation.

[64] The difference between a recognition of this status and a belief in its validity will be discussed in the section on fugitivity. I do not want to suggest here that all slaves internalized the cultural logic of the plantation owner, but I do wish to recognize the power of such ideology within the plantation geography.

[65] White, *Arn't I A Woman?*; John B. Boles, *Black Southerners, 1619-1869* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1984); Damian Alan Paragas, *The Quarters and the Fields: Slave Families in the Non-Cotton South* (Gainsville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2010); Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*; Johnson, *Soul by Soul*; Blassingame, *The Slave Community*; Anthony Kaye, *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

[66] Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*.

themselves, like any other body, object, or person that they attached to their home, and not as part of the social world beyond its threshold.

However, the historical record suggests that the actions of the enslaved often disrupted this ideological construction. While the debate among scholars about the presence and limitations of slave agency continues to rage, everyday forms of resistance appear to have been relatively widespread in the plantation south.[67] Such disruption of the master's sense of total control threatened to precipitate a sense of precarity, however, and in order to mediate this, a set of discursive and material practices masked or punished this resistance for those seeking dominion. The use of violence and threat by slave owners to control the slave population, which absolutely functioned as a practice of home that worked to ameliorate precarity, is well documented in the literature.[68] However, I suggest it is equally important to mark the affective work performed discursively through the perpetuation of stereotype and other beliefs about the capacity of black humans,[69] which fulfilled a similar function. Those practicing dominion avoided the violation of their sense of self both via violence and force and through a careful management of their own sense of the possibility of agency on the part of their slaves.

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[67] Johnson, *Soul By Soul*; Camp, *Closer to Freedom*; Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*; William E. Weithoff, *The Insolent Slave* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2002); Dylan C. Penningroth, *The Claims of Kinfolk: African American Property and Community in the Nineteenth-Century South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

[68] Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*; James O. Breeden, *Advice Among Masters: The Ideal in Slave Management in the Old South* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980).

[69] This thinking stems from Patricia A. Turner, *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994) and Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*.

Thavolia Glymph offers historical examples of the mental reticulations necessary to sustain dominion. Although she writes primarily about white women of the planter-class, her chapter on domestic slave resistance and the discursive response to it analyzes historical records produced by both masters and mistresses.[70] Glymph describes how women of the south had to rely on slave labor to "meet the standards of domesticity"[71] outlined in contemporary prescriptive literature and shared with bourgeois homes in the northern U.S. and in Europe. When slaves failed to perform tasks correctly or refused to work, however, white women's homes fell below these standards, calling both their womanhood and the "civilization" of their household into question. Women and men of the planter-class saw enslaved domestic laborers as objects within their home—as tools for proper house-keeping. However, slaves recognized that by disrupting the domestic sphere, they could disrupt or resist their masters' and mistresses' sense of safety and power.[72] Glymph's text argues that in order to feel safe within their homes, planter-class men and women couched their descriptions of acts of resistance in the language of "behavior," as this was a "less disturbing framework for fear."[73] Rather than seeing everyday resistance as such, those practicing dominion filtered these acts through the lens of racial stereotype, which suggested the in-born ineptitude for domestic tasks and

[70] I am specifically talking about chapter three of her text, which draws from the diaries and letters of planter-class women, as well as legal records which would have been an arena more heavily populated by planter-class men. See Thavolia Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage: The Transformation of the Plantation Household*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2008.
[71] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 65.
[72] Ibid., 66.
[73] Ibid., 67.

inherent "filthiness" of enslaved women. The inability of slaves to perform the "civilized" tasks of domesticity also reinforced the ideology of benevolent paternalism with which dominion aligned. The discursive conversion of slave resistance into slave ineptitude mediated the threat of resistance, not by force but through language.

I do not want to suggest here that domestic slaves were not subject to violence and force—indeed, the first chapter of Glymph's text centers on the violence of white women within plantation slavery, and her work here is in good scholarly company. As Robert Olwell writes, even in a ideological struggle for the control of slaves, "masters held the whip hand in a very literal sense."[74] However, a discursive erasure of potential resistance existed alongside these physical forms of violence and coercion, mediating a sense of precarity through the machinations of a rhetorical magic trick which disappears the resistant power of those beneath a person on a social hierarchy. Stephanie Camp describes the system of relations on the planation as a "paternalistic combination of hegemonic cultural control and violent discipline."[75] Because the plantation household relied on the presence of enslaved people to function, even in its most intimate spaces, the ideology of paternalism and the belief in white racial superiority masked the risk inherent in the intimacy of domestic slavery to preserve the ideal of dominion.

This discursive work points to one of the central paradoxes of dominion. Despite the fact that this form of home rests at the top of the social hierarchy, dominion could not exist without the acquiescence, or the performance of acquiescence, of everyone within

[74] Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects*, 189.
[75] Camp, *Closer to Freedom,* 3.

the plantation. As Kirsten E. Wood writes, "power did not flow automatically from property titles and slave codes."[76] Rather, cultural and physical control of slaves had to "extract not only obedience but even consent from enslaved people."[77] The enslaved, as well as the planter's wife, children, and employees, all had to legitimate the master's social dominance, and resistance from any group threatened his dominion over all others.[78] Plantation masters often experiencee a sense of insecurity or vulnerability, despite their distinct legal and material advantage. Because perfect control is a mythic ideal, their social, cultural, and physical domination of the plantation "had to be constantly asserted, defended, and if possible extended"[79] lest a master find himself "beset with work stoppages, truancy, theft…arson or murder."[80] The oppressive social structures of slavery and the social order of the plantation household demanded an acquiescence to authority that left little ideological room for the agency of women, children, or the enslaved. Therefore, racially-informed patriarchy and paternalism invoked notions of stewardship and reciprocal responsibility to allow masters to feel themselves to be in total command while masking this oppression as a benevolent care for populations deemed incapable of taking care of themselves.[81] This ideological

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[76] Wood, *Masterful Women,* 12.
[77] Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 3. Of course, consent is a contested concept within the literature on slave experience. For texts which complicate the nature of slave consent, see Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*; Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998).
[78] Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*, 8.
[79] Wood, *Masterful Women*, 12.
[80] Wood, *Masterful Women*, 12.
[81] Bardaglio, *Reconstructing the Household*, 25-26.

loophole provided a justification for the legitimacy of the plantation hierarchy, and equally importantly, delegitimated challenges to that authority by those within his home.

The anxiety of mastery and the ideological responses to it can be seen in a variety of primary sources from the time.[82] One example is Thomas Jefferson's well-studied grappling with the morality of slavery and the nature of racial difference in *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Query 18, ostensibly intended to cover the topic of manners particular to Virginia, concerns itself primarily with the impact of slavery on the culture of the state. Jefferson, himself a slave-owner, nevertheless views the "unremitting despotism"[83] that inheres in mastery as troubling to the "manners and morals"[84] of Southern men. In this query, Jefferson recognizes the dissonance between the notion of natural liberty that spurred the American Revolution and the institution of slavery that sustained its economy. He writes that "considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events,"[85] meaning that he foresees a moment when the masses of the enslaved might rise up in revolution as the colonies recently had (and as Haitian slaves shortly would). His reference to "numbers" suggests an awareness of how vastly outnumbered were masters

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[82] For an overview of pro-slavery ideology, see Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Ideology of Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Antebellum South, 1830-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1981); Breeden, *Advice Among Masters*. Faust's introduction notes that much pro-slavery writing circulated only among southerners, suggesting that its purpose was not to convince northerners to change their view on slavery but rather to reinforce the righteousness of the system to those already entrenched within it.
[83] Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787; repr. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1955): 162. Citations are to the UNC Press edition.
[84] Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 162.
[85] Ibid., 163.

by slaves. He ends the query hoping that the "total emancipation" whose inevitability he imagines might occur "with the consent of the masters, rather than by their extirpation."[86] Here again, he worries that a slave revolution or the freeing of slaves might lead to the death of masters like himself.

A similar anxiety appears in Query 14, which includes a long meditation on what Jefferson sees as the natural basis of racial difference and incompatibility. He begins this section of the query by discussing why it would not be wise to allow the formerly-enslaved black population to remain in Virginia following emancipation. He lists a set of reasons, including "ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained," which would "produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race."[87] In this query, then, as in Query 18, Jefferson articulates an awareness that the "injuries" of slavery might lead to the destruction of those in the planter-class when the system of slavery ends.

In Query 14, however, Jefferson follows this recognition of the potential for revolutionary violence on the part of the slaves with a long rationale for his eventual "suspicion" that "the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to whites in the endowments of both body and mind."[88] While Jefferson offers a more measured and skeptical discussion of racial difference than apologists of the 19th century, the sheer volume of writing and thinking Jefferson devotes

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[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid., 138. It is worth noting here that Wilderson's concept of racial antagonism echoes (or invokes) Jefferson's late-18th century fears.
[88] Ibid., 143.

to this point reflects his deep need to convince himself of its truth. It is particularly telling that this meditation on race comes immediately after his discussion of the legal possibility of mass emancipation in a query wholly unrelated to the question of race itself. When he mentions the future absence of the legal oppression of slaves, which promises total mastery over the them, Jefferson retreats to a reaffirmation of his racial superiority through the abuse of reason. He uses the discursive strategy of dominion to reaffirm his total power—his "natural" power, even—when the thought of emancipation and the potential vengeance of the slaves precipitates a sense of precarity.

Beyond using these discursive strategies to shore up the belief in the necessity of the slave system, dominion also worked to ensure the perpetuation of this social system through various discursive and material practices. Jefferson attributes the perpetuation of the violence of slavery to a passive absorption of its "passions" by (white) children.[89] However, the primary sources cites in Glymph's text reveal more intentional "rituals of power"[90] meant to maintain social hierarchy. For example, she notes a WPA slave narrative in which Harriet Robinson remembers having to "say 'Yessuh Master' and bow real low"[91] before any new white children born to her master. She reports that all the slaves across the plantation, even those who worked in the fields and had less contact with the master's family, had to queue up to perform this act of deference before an

[89] Ibid., 162: "The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to his worst of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities."□
[90] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 123.
[91] Ibid.

infant. This kind of action reflects and reinforces the white supremacy inherent to the practice of dominion.

Other material practices encouraged children to understand their slaves as extensions of themselves, incorporating their behavior and bodies into their sense of self. For example, Glymph relays the story of a slave who would be hit by the mistress when her children made spelling errors.[92] This moment could be read as gratuitous violence on the part of the mistress, or an indication of childhood empathy for the enslaved, but I suggest this practice laid the groundwork for the later ability of children to rely on enslaved labor for their domestic success or economic livelihood without disrupting their sense of home. Punishing a child's errors by beating a slave works to attach the child's individual success or failure to the bodily well-being of another human. This kind of practice sets up a dynamic that will perpetuate the blurring of the line between master and slave necessary to a sense of dominion.

The tension between harmful action and the rhetoric of helpfulness vibrates at the core of dominion. Both these structures provide a means through which dominion can mediate a sense of precarity, even as it simultaneously precipitates that precarity. The sense of threat produced by structures of control demands additional control and the performance of deference by all those within the geographic sphere of dominion. Of course, total control of other humans is nearly, if not wholly, impossible. The ideal of dominion, then, stood most vulnerable to those who refused its power and stole themselves away.

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[92] Ibid., 34.

FUGITIVE HOMES

I have termed the mobile, cunning home at the other end of the spectrum the "fugitive" home in order to place myself within the extensive scholarship on the fugitivity of blackness in modern systems. When speaking of slavery, "fugitive" certainly has more concrete and legal connotations, but a home need not be inhabited by a fugitive slave to be a fugitive home. Here, I use the term to describe a home that exists as a refuge for persecuted persons, or a home that is in hiding. While fugitive homes may have existed within the physical geography of the plantation, the sociality they produced intentionally allowed an escape from the totality of the masters' dominion. The core of the fugitive home is freedom through refusal and strategic absence—what Fred Moten calls, "fugitive movement in and out of the frame, bar, or whatever externally imposed social logic."[93] I also draw from Neil Roberts description of freedom to understand fugitivity. He writes, "Freedom is not a place; it is a state of being."[94] The fugitive home produces freedom in spite of domination, producing subjects who refuse subjection or providing an escape that cultivates agency. A fugitive home can be simultaneously within and without, subject to and hidden from,[95] rooted in place and on the run.

I root my description of this type of home in the figure of the "runaway" slave, although not the one that most commonly appears in the popular imagination. While the national narrative of those who escaped slavery is a long journey north to freedom, the

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[93] Fred Moten, "The Case of Blackness," *Criticism* 50:2 (2008): 179.
[94] Neil Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 11.
[95] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

historiography of the plantation records that many slaves would escape the space of the plantation "but remained hidden in close proximity to their husbands, wives, parents, or children."[96] These runaways often lived in nearby woods or swamps in order to stay close to their "home" plantation.[97] These runaways would remove themselves from the ostensibly total geography of the plantation, from the slave rosters, from the sight-lines or domination of the slave master, but would not remove themselves from the social world of black people. In fact, often without the knowledge of the slave master (or to his frustration), these slaves would reappear on the plantation to see friends or relatives on days of rest, but would return to their hiding place following the visit. For their part, masters continued to see fugitive slaves as part of their property, and subject to their dominion, despite their having absented themselves from the labor and oppression of slavery. In others words, these fugitives moved through the geography of the plantation, but would not allow themselves to be subject to its domination. This practice serves as a metaphor for the practice of the fugitive home as I see it. The fugitive home does not necessarily exist outside of the geography of the plantation, but it does produce an alternative geography in which enslaved people or other plantation dwellers could be at

[96] Lenus Jack Jr., "'I Looked for Home Elsewhere': Black Southern Plantation Families, 1790-1940," in *Plantation Society and Race Relations: The Origins of Inequality,* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999): 77-87.
[97] Gutman, T*he Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*; Blassingame, *The Slave Community*; Larry E. Hudson Jr., *To Have and To Hold: Slave Work and Family Life in Antebellum South Carolina* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1997).

home by absenting themselves from the dominion of another, sometimes only briefly and sometimes permanently.[98]

The fugitive home mediated the sense of precarity that precipitates from being dominated by some form of power, be it a system or an individual. Most obviously, scholarship and testimony have documented the spectacular violence performed on the bodies of the enslaved, particularly at the hands of overseers but also at the hands of masters, mistresses, and even black drivers. This violence intended to ensure the compliance and obsequiousness of the enslaved, and its constant threat served as a source of vulnerability. The enactment of power also had a psychological dimension, however, in that slaves, as salable goods, had limited control over where they lived and worked,[99] or over the conditions of that life and labor. Family units or social networks could be and frequently were disrupted because of the master's economic problems or his need for a dowry. Rations, the condition of housing, and the physical safety of friends and relatives were beyond the direct control of the enslaved.[100] Although scholars have argued compellingly for the existence of slave agency and slave resistance,[101] Saidiya Hartman

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[98] The idea of alternative geographies comes from McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*. One of her central claims in the text is that black women create alternative geographic knowledge, which often paradoxically is free from domination while overlapping spatially with geographies of domination.

[99] Johnson, *Soul by Soul* offers a good description of what control or power slaves did have over these decisions.

[100] Many of the texts on mastery cited in the previous section of this chapter discuss how rations, housing, and other "gifts" were used as a means of control over the enslaved. See also J. David Knottnerus, David L. Monk, and Edward Jones, "The Slave Plantation System from a Total Institution Perspective" in *Plantation Society and Race Relations: The Origins of Inequality* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999): 17-27.

[101] See n. 50 for a list of scholarship that informs my thinking on this topic.

notes that "agency," for the enslaved and for others oppressed by a social structure, is circumscribed by the limitations of their social position and the oppressiveness of the system in which they must survive.[102] This circumscription and its associated contingency would have created a sense of precarity for those who sought to practice the fugitive home. The inhabitants of the fugitive home would have necessarily recognized their vulnerability to the unilateral exercise of power by those above them on the social hierarchy and its chaotic, unpredictable, and disruptive results.

Rather than confronting domination with an equal but opposite assertion of power, however, the fugitive home instead masks, hides, and absents the bodies and minds of those who wish to be free from oppression. I see the fugitive home as in a relation of "antagonism,"[103] to borrow Frank B. Wilderson III's terms, with dominion. The two homes cannot be reconciled, and so they exist in antagonism perpetually until one ceases to exist. The act of creating a fugitive home is a theft in the eyes of the master, in that some object or subject rightfully within his power has gone missing. Moten calls fugitivity "stolen life,"[104] but complicates the idea of theft by asserting that the fugitive also refuses ownership. This is to say that while the fugitive home is a theft, the purpose of the theft is not ownership but the freedom to refuse ownership. Fugitivity does not confront dominion so much as it refuses its logics and structure, allowing persons to

[102] Harman, *Scenes of Subjection*.
[103] Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*.
[104] Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 179.

move "out of the frame"[105] without regard to their physical mobility. Fugitivity is not then the opposite of dominion, so much as a refusal of it.

The fugitive home exists primarily through a set of narrative and spatial practices that limited the access of those in power to the fugitive home and its inhabitants while also producing and maintaining a social world. Because the fugitive home serves in large part to absent a person from the ostensibly totalizing geography of the plantation, the slave cabins themselves were not necessarily a spatial demarcation of the fugitive home, although fugitive practices did at times take place within the space. For example, Stephanie Camp tells the story of a woman named California who hung up abolitionist prints in the slave cabin she inhabited while hired out to another plantation. This woman recognized that she was beyond the dominion of her master, and antagonized the owner of the plantation on which she worked by passively asserting her desire for liberty.[106] While Camp remarks on the rarity of this kind of act, it does reveal that slave quarter could be a space of antagonism and improvised dissent. However, the visibility of slave cabins within the plantation geography and their accessibility by the master, overseer, or other powerful people made them insufficient spaces for the protection or production of a self in the absence of other practices.

The enslaved on a plantation generally had precious little control over the planning and design of the physical layout of the spaces they inhabited. As discussed in the previous section, the layout of the plantation was a conscious plan intended to

[105] Ibid.
[106] Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 96-99.

confirm and reassert the power of the master and the subjection of those beneath him on the social hierarchy. The enslaved had little choice about where they slept or the physical condition of their housing. On certain plantations, slaves who performed non-field labor (e.g. cooks, nurses, blacksmiths) slept near their job sites[107] rather than returning to a central quarters at night. The design of the plantation objectified the slave, connecting their person wholly to a sphere of work rather than recognizing a humanity beyond their usefulness. Slaves had precious little control over the spaces in which they made a life, which demanded that the practice of home take on dimensions beyond the spatial in order to fulfill its purpose.

When fugitive homes did produce a physical space, that space often appeared "unhomely" to the white people who held positions of power. Vlach, for example, writes that slaves created a landscape "at the margins of the plantation…that generally escaped much notice, mostly because it was marked in ways that planters either considered insignificant or *could not recognize*."[108] His archeological work suggests a preference among the enslaved for "a landscape marked by few overt boundaries and fixed sites….open to and characterized by movement."[109] Rebecca Ginsburg similarly suggests that "enslaved workers' territorial systems were typically more fluid…than…those of elite whites."[110] These kinds of landscape formations often registered among white

[107] Vlach, *Back of the Big House*, 45; Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, chapter two.
[108] Vlach, *Back of the Big House*, 13. My emphasis.
[109] Ibid., 14.
[110] Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg, *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2010): 52.

observers as "sloppy (or worse, 'nasty')"[111] or as indications of the "Indolence and Nastiness"[112] produced via the system of enslavement. Barbara Heath cites evidence that slaves grew "edible *Chenopodium* plants" near their homes, likely to supplement their rations, which was "*misunderstood* by nonresident whites as neglectful or untidy."[113] Here again, white observers misperceive intentional landscape construction as evidence of untidiness. On the whole, Ginsberg argues, "whites often *failed to recognize* the components of enslaved workers' environments, the sites and paths, for what they were and how they were really used."[114] Fugitive homes created a landscape that was illegible to those in power.

Archaeological and historical scholarship indicates that the illegibility of this landscape was intentional. Ginsburg writes that because those in power could not recognize the black landscapes within the geography of the plantation, these sites and paths became "a useful place for acts [slaves] wished to hide from whites, such as eating stolen goods, enacting rituals, taking a break from work, or meeting friends and family away from eyes that might look askance at such visits."[115] While Ginsberg's chapter focuses on how daily inhabitation of this fugitive landscape aided runaway slaves who sought permanent liberation from the system of slavery, others, like Stephanie Camp,

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[111] Vlach, *Back of the Big House*, 14.
[112] Ibid., 14. Vlach pulls this quote from Isaac's *The Transformation of Virginia*. Isaac writes that the historical figure who made this statement that was "more concerned to deplore what he saw as deprivation than to interpret the signs of a different way of life" (31), in keeping with my argument for the misrecognition of fugitive homes among white observers of the plantation.
[113] Ellis and Ginsberg, *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation*, 171. My emphasis.
[114] Ibid., 52. My emphasis.
[115] Ibid., 52.

focus on how such a landscape provided the possibility of "short-term flight"[116] and other "masked and short lived"[117] forms of quotidian resistance. This illegibility functioned on two levels: one, it produced thresholds that could only be seen by those who could read the spatial language, and two, it protected the spatial practices of the fugitive home from disruption by making them appear not to exist. Although in its ideal form the fugitive home would provide permanent absence from the dominations and oppressions of enslavement, descriptions of the role of landscape in less permanent forms of refuge still reveals the practices that composed the fugitive home.

For example, a common practice among the enslaved was to "steal away"—to steal oneself from the master—for shorter or longer periods of time, escaping into the woods, swamps, or other land surrounding the plantation, while remaining near the plantation itself. Slave registers continued to list slaves who had run away, particularly those believed to be living in maroon communities or making their home near to the plantation, even after they had left the active ownership of the slave-master. Ginsburg notes that the black landscapes that made these acts possible were legible to the enslaved, despite the fact that their "markers were indecipherable to most whites."[118] Relating the story of a man who evaded capture for months despite not leaving the woods beyond the plantation where he had been enslaved, Ginsberg notes that he "inhabited a system of trails and spaces known to and apprehended by other slaves"[119] and was "fed regularly by

[116] Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 2.
[117] Ibid., 3.
[118] Ellis and Ginsberg, *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation*, 54.
[119] Ibid., 55.

other enslaved people who knew of his whereabouts and kept this information among themselves."[120] By his own testimony, he would not have been able to remain free without both knowledge of this landscape and the support of this community.

Misrecognition, masking, and other strategies of illegibility produced the freedom that is central to the fugitive home, even for those who did not "steal away" from the physical geography of the plantation. While the domination of the plantation was ostensibly total, those living in the quarters or in other slave housing still found moments in which they were beyond the surveillance or control of the master, mistress, or overseer.[121] The fugitive home, then, also existed within the geographical boundary of the plantation but out of sight—things that happened at night, on days of rest, or in the daily moments of empowering invisibility that would inevitably have occurred in a space where those in power were so extensively outnumbered by the people they sought to control.[122] In these moments of freedom, the enslaved engaged in practices that supported their social reproduction—sharing gossip, taking food or other resources from the stores of those in power, educating one another about tactics and strategies for refuge and survival.[123] These hidden practices sustained slave life both physically and socially,

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[120] Ibid., 55.

[121] Knotternus, et al. note that while great pains were taken to constantly monitor the activity of slaves, the system was also "marked by very real lapses and 'slippages' in its operation." See "The Slave Plantation System from a Total Institution Perspective," in *Plantation Society and Race Relations*. It is worth noting that even authors who sought to describe the plantation as a total system found evidence of its lack of complete control.

[122] Camp, *Closer to Freedom*; Vlach, *Back of the Big House*; Ginsberg and Ellis, *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation*; Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia*.

[123] Both Camp and Ginsberg emphasize everyday practices of resistance, although the literature on plantation slavery is peppered with them on the whole. Most if not all

through the taking of resources that would assuage hunger or sickness and through the creation of a social network of knowledge, care, and support that allowed slaves to affirm themselves as part of something beyond the oppressions of slavery. Although still very much present within the geography of the plantation and at risk of becoming subject to its violent dominations, the enslaved could inhabit the fugitive home in these stolen moments of invisibility, reaffirming their connection to a social world and warding off the sense of danger and vulnerability produced by systemic slavery.

Harriet Jacobs' escape into the garret of her grandmother's slave cabin serves as an extreme example of this kind of fugitive home, while also complicating the relationship between mobility and fugitivity. As Katherine McKittrick notes, Jacobs' found a "loophole of retreat"[124] in the garret where she could see the plantation and keep an eye on her children without being seen by the master. Because she was absent despite being present—absent from the visual dominion of the master but present in the fugitive home made by herself and the other slaves who knew her whereabouts—she found a larger freedom in the cramped garrett than she had found moving freely around the plantation grounds. Jacobs' story reminds us that the fugitive home produced other discomforts even as it worked against the precarity present in the lives of those living subject to the patriarchal and white supremacist logics of slavery. Both Jacobs and those slaves mentioned above who lived beyond the boundary of the plantation could be found

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authors referring to such act cite James Scott's important work on quotidian resistance in both *Weapons of the Weak* and *Hidden Transcripts*.

[124] Harriet Jacobs [Linda Brent], *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, cited in McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 37.

and returned by force at any point. Through the practice of hiding, however, or the practice of "stealing away," those inhabiting the fugitive home could relieve themselves of the constant sense of precarity experienced within the space of the plantation. Beyond sight or reach of the plantation master or other figures of power on the plantation and protected by a social network and secret knowledge, fugitives could produce a sense of selfhood that pushed back against the complete subjection desired by a system and ideology in which they were as much property as person.

A set of visible spatial practices on the plantation also produced fugitive homes. For example, Garrett Fesler's analysis of soil data at the Utopia plantation site revealed the existence of swept yards attached to slave quarters in South Carolina. Fesler found archeological evidence that "halos" of debris—animal bones, animal and human waste, ashes—had encircled the slave cabins, although the spaces directly next to the cabins had no such remnants. Fesler argues that this indicates a regular practice of yard sweeping among the slaves on this plantation. Fesler suggests that this practice of yard sweeping "may have helped people living under unimaginable stress to find comfort"[125] through a "remembered way of living"[126] carried over from Africa, connecting the enslaved to both a wider social world of black people and to an ancestral tradition. Heath also mentions the "subtractive practice of yard sweeping,"[127] noting that it may have been a means of "dissuad[ing] malevolent spirits from harming the living."[128] In both studies, scholars

[125] Ellis and Ginsberg, *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation*, 45.
[126] Ibid.
[127] Ibid., 172.
[128] Ibid.

interpret the practice of yard sweeping not as a means of claiming space but as a spatial practice that connects a home with a social or spiritual world.

While this practice does visibly mark the boundary of the home, the impermanence of the practice implies a stronger connection to fugitivity than dominion. The yard would have had to been swept regularly and repeatedly, perhaps even daily, rather than providing the kind of permanent demarcation of a boundary found in the fences and legal plots of dominion. More similar to the domestic labor that might have produced a sense of home for women in both the north and south, the practice of yard sweeping fails to produce a defensible space despite revealing a person's sense of connection to a plot of land. I see this practice as productive of a threshold for the self—a line beyond which debris can collect without being part of the home—without necessarily rooting the fugitive home to the land through a permanent claim to space. Instead, this practice is mobile. If a fugitive home relocated, the same practice could immediately demarcate a new boundary. When they do create space, fugitive homes do so through impermanent practices of care, which contrast the legal claims to space or permanent fences of dominion.

The garden plots of slaves are a similar kind of space, kept up through labor independent of enslavement but still productive of a visible space. Scholars of plantation life continue to debate the role of these plots in slave life. Some view them as a survival mechanism, meant to augment the meager rations provided by slave masters.[129] Some masters even enforced the cultivation of slave gardens and appropriated surplus

[129] Ibid., 171; Vlach, *Back of the Big House*, 14-15.

vegetables to supplement their own income.[130] Other scholars see them as a means of limited economic independence, as slaves often sold the vegetables grown in their gardens either in a public market or to their owner or his family.[131] Robert Olwell has gone so far as to argue that the production of marketable vegetables in slave gardens, particularly in the late 18th century, provided slaves with a means to see themselves as labor, rather than as dutiful subjects of the master. Olwell argues that the language and concepts of the market economy allowed slaves a way to understand their lives that was separate from the ideology of patriarchy that otherwise controlled life-ways on the plantation.[132] For Olwell, then, garden plots not only provided a small window of economic independence but also gave slaves access to structures of thinking that changed their understanding of the nature of slavery as an institution. Although not all scholars would go so far as Olwell regarding the power of the garden plot within slave life, most agree that the production and maintenance of gardens by slaves acted as a way to gain a limited freedom, either from something as simple as hunger or something as complex as the ideology of patriarchy, within the geography of the plantation but in antagonism of or as a "loophole of retreat" from its dominating power structures.

In this way, the garden plots serve as an excellent example of a spatial practice that produced a threshold between the self housed in a fugitive home and the wider social world of the plantation. Katherine McKittrick has written extensively about the nature of fugitivity on the plantation, particularly as a figure for describing black geography or

[130] Camp, *Closer to Freedom*, 19.
[131] Vlach, *Back of the Big House*; Ginsberg and Ellis, *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation*.
[132] Olwell, *Masters, Slaves and Subjects*.

black geographic knowing. Her recent work takes up the garden plot as a particular example of the spaces of freedom, subversion, or resistance that existed within the plantation.[133] I follow this thinking in arguing that the garden plot was a space of care and nuturance that would have been part of the fugitive home. In the garden, the willing labor of slaves cultivated life-sustaining or economically viable food/market goods that perpetuated and benefited slave life beyond, but still within, the dominations of slavery. The garden plot is a particularly apt metaphor for the relationship between fugitive home and the wider plantation, in that its role in sustaining the life of the enslaved perpetuated the system of slavery by fueling plantation labor. At the same time, however, these garden plots also disrupted the total control of the slave-master, in that they provided food to persons regardless the desires of the person ostensibly in charge of such things. They also allowed those visible to the master to feed those who remained invisible to the master, sustaining social networks beyond the control of the plantation. The garden plot's fugitivity exists in its ability to look like one thing—a space of cultivation that preserved and strengthened the slave-master's labor force—while possibly being something more subversive than that.

The garden plot, then, is not illegible so much as indeterminate. The production of indeterminacy is another means by which the fugitive home masked its inhabitants, activities, and existence, particularly in instances where invisibility or absence were impossible. Garden plots would have been a somewhat risky space, as their visibility and slaves' investment in them might have allowed masters to threaten such spaces as a

[133] McKittrick, "Plantation Futures."

means of punishment or control. However, the garden held meaning in multiple registers simultaneously. The master could perceive the food grown in them as indicative of the consent of his slaves to the perpetuation of the system of slavery or of their willingness to support the economic productivity of his plantation. However, the food grown in them might also have fed persons living beyond the geography of the plantation, free or fugitive from the master's dominion. These gardens potentially fulfilled multiple purposes then, rather than having a specific purpose that directly supported a particular ideology. Those purposes that were legible to the plantation owner protected the space by appeasing power, while the more subversive purposes of the space could remain hidden, if they existed at all. This indeterminacy relates to the spatial misdirection and misrecognition which protected those selves that inhabited fugitive homes.

In addition to these spatial practices, the fugitive home also relied on illegible narrative techniques to demarcate the threshold between self and society. Rather than police a physical threshold, the fugitive home encrypts the threshold so that anyone who knows the code can pass. Using narrative or discursive strategies to mark the threshold of the home allowed a continuity of self despite the highly contingent nature of slave life, as well as protecting the self from that contingency by hiding its investments within coded language. Scholarship has documented the vast extent of these linguistic practices, from the hidden meanings in slave songs to the coded messages that directed fugitives and runaways.[134] These verbal practices most closely relate to the "messy" spatial practices

[134] One of the central sources for the scholarly recognition of the deep meanings of slave songs is the chapter on Sorrow Songs in W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1908;

that produced illegible homes. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. also cites the existence of linguistic trickster figures, borrowed from African folk traditions, within the slave cultures of the Americas. Within the cosmologies of the enslaved, these tricksters often became seen as liberators or as enemies of the enslavers, while also retaining their attachment to linguistic indeterminacy.[135] This indicates an ideological connection between indeterminate or "tricky" language—what Gates would call the practice of "signifyin(g)"—and freedom from slavery. This indeterminate language, which can mean one of two things or both things at once, more closely parallels indeterminate spatial practices like the garden plot. In all cases, however, coded language determined who could enter the fugitive home and also served to sustain its intimate connections.

For example, scholars note the prevalence of "away marriages," which reveal how narrative practices often produced the intimate sphere of the fugitive home. In an away marriage, two married slaves lived on different plantations but had been allowed to marry one another by their respective masters.[136] Often these slaves were able to procure passes to see one another, but any children that came from the union remained with the mother and the nuclear family was generally not permitted to live together while both parents

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New York: Oxford UP, 2008). DuBois argues that through the spirituals that arose in plantation slavery, "the slave spoke to the world." He goes on to say that because of the precarious position of the slave, "such a message is naturally veiled and half articulate." (171) While "half articulate" might be read as a criticism of the songs, I suggest that here DuBois engages a fugitive linguistic practice to mask his argument that these songs in fact communicated much, although perhaps in a way that still protected the singer and message from the threat of oppressive power.

[135] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1988), 37-38.

[136] Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*; Hudson, *To Have and to Hold*.

remained enslaved. Since family or kin networks generally connect to the self, rather than being seen as part of the social world beyond the home, these families could not rely on spatial creation or policing alone to mark the threshold between the two. Instead, the historical record indicates that parents (usually fathers) who lived "away" were kept present in the home through storytelling and other narrative practices that kept absent persons present in a planation-based network. If a father could not visit often, he would be kept alive through the mentioning of his name or descriptions of his behavior and beliefs. Slaves who escaped, either north or into the regions around the plantation, were kept present in a similar way. Then when those absent slaves returned to visit, or when relatives were allowed to visit their "home" plantation, they were less strangers because they had been a narrative presence even in their physical absence.

Although most away or abroad marriages were recognized and sanctioned by slave masters, narratively connected social networks ideally produced truly fugitive homes as well. For example, the story above from Ginsberg's chapter about the fugitive who survived in the woods thanks to the help and support of other enslaved people reveals how narrative networks connecting the enslaved sustained black selves who sought juridical freedom. Ginsberg's research supports the idea that black social networks generally tracked those slaves that were "missing" from the plantation, suggesting that enslaved people shared geographical information among themselves. Citing the existence of an "identifiable black sphere,"[137] she argues that the enslaved "formed bonds of support, trust, and resistance to white control" via their participation in "a shared, hidden

[137] Ellis and Ginsberg, *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation,* 55.

landscape."[138] The blurring here of intimate bonds and engagement with a landscape reflects how the fugitive home relied on both geographical knowledge and social connection to exist. The threshold of the fugitive home and its ability to ward off precarity relied equally on linguistic, narrative, and spatial practices to produce the illegibility, misunderstanding, and indeterminacy necessary for fugitive survival and thriving.

Often these practices intentionally engaged structures of oppression in order to create invisibility or to hide fugitive acts. For example, the structure of thought that allowed those practicing dominion to hide slave resistance within the rhetoric of ineptitude functioned as much to cultivate and protect that resistance as it did to shore up the ideologies of mastery. In Glymph's text, she writes that even in the historiography, enslaved women are "rendered childlike and irresponsible," meaning that they could not be "serious contenders for the status of rebels."[139] However, she also cites numerous examples of resistant behavior masked by these assumptions about the capability of the enslaved. Additionally, Glymph notes that enslaved women mobilized these stereotypes to lighten their workloads, getting out of doing certain tasks by feigning an inability to complete them properly. This suggest that the enslaved used the stereotypes applied to them to their advantage, particularly in moments when the misrecognition of someone in power would lead them to have a bit more freedom. Fugitive homes, then, engaged

[138] Ibid., 63.
[139] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 94.

whatever materials were available, including structures that ostensibly shored up oppression, to create spaces for the cultivation of selves and social worlds.

Religion offered a similar kind of structure, which masters intended as support for the social hierarchy on which they relied, but which slaves appropriated and altered as a means of producing and protecting the subversive social connections necessary for the production of a fugitive home. Albert J. Raboteau describes how religion among the enslaved was both "formally organized and spontaneously adapted,"[140] in that slaves both attended formal services, which more often than not served mastery, and gathered in secret in the "hush harbors" near the plantation to worship on their own terms, beyond the gaze of the master. This latter, invisible kind of religion provided opportunity not only for worship, but also for social connection and for the reproduction of the fugitive home through the communication of its central ideologies. In particular, slave Christianity rejected tenets of institutional Christianity that shored up the power of the master and reinforced a set of rules which supported the survival and thriving of the enslaved and their social world. For example, Raboteau quotes William Wells Brown, who notes that slaves "thought that to deceive whites was a religious duty."[141] Rather than accepting theft or lying as unequivocal sins, as the master's version of Christianity might have it, the enslaved chose to see theft against or lying to whites as integral to their survival, and to only recognize such behavior as a sin when it broke the trust of the enslaved community. In this way, the enslaved used the materials of Christianity to produce codes

[140] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The 'Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978): 212.
[141] Ibid., 296.

of moral behavior that functioned to protect the slave community from the abuses of power—they used Christianity to produce a fugitive home.

Of course, none of these practices changed the legal status of the enslaved. The fugitive home did not seek to directly confront or undo the systemic structures that supported dominion. Rather, the fugitive home simply refused to recognize or validate the logics and ideologies that underpinned the dominations of slavery. Just as dominion could not recognize the legitimacy of fugitive home, so the fugitive home did not recognize dominion as legitimate. In the context of the U.S., then, fugitivity did not seek to incorporate enslaved persons into the national imaginary or into the category of national citizen. This home practice did not engage in the politics of confrontation, attempting to overpower those responsible for dominion. Instead, the fugitive home refuses power and makes known the fallacy of its domination through its antagonistic unwillingness to engage on the terms of power. The fugitive home, like non-violent protest tactics, antagonizes power by refusing its legitimacy. Unlike non-violent protest, however, the fugitive home also masks its action to protect the selves engaged in the practice from the violence of power, rather than working to make the violence of power visible.

THE SPECTRUM OF PLANTATION HOMES

Of course, both ends of the spectrum of home I describe here are very much ideals. The real practices of home on the plantation intended to move individuals toward either of these ideal forms. As discussed above, much of the literature of slavery speaks

about the sense of insecurity or vulnerability experienced by those seeking dominion, despite their social, cultural, and physical power over those beneath them on the social hierarchy. This anxiety constantly threatened to disrupt the sense of control necessary to ideal dominion. Resistance of even the most mundane sort would have undermined this ideal feeling of power, suggesting that it is unlikely that anyone seeking dominion ever truly experienced the total power it promises. Rather, some homes on the plantation sought dominion, attaching themselves to its logics and finding a cruel optimism in their inability to ever reach the final goal.

However, the fugitive home I describe is also very much an ideal. Being close to a physical and familiar place and yet absent from the power structures of the plantation, maintaining the ties of a social network without necessarily enjoying a geographic proximity, and having freedom of movement in a social world that certainly did not wish to allow it would all be difficult goals to reach for an enslaved person. Based on the literature, scholars know that many fugitive homes, even well-established and relatively large maroon communities, often came under attack by more powerful entities that wished to exert dominion over them and re-establish or reaffirm the dominant social order. Rather than growing out of a prescriptive literature, however, as the planter's sense of dominion did, the ideal of the fugitive home grew out of the social and cultural experience of oppressed people, primarily slaves, in the antebellum South. The practices of the fugitive home produced a space of self and social cultivation, protected through indeterminacy and a willingness to live with, rather than control, contingency. Any "control" over others would have taken the form of education or social instruction—here,

a practice of cultivation or care rather than a practice of domination. However, this ability to cultivate an alternate social world was no less an ideal than the total control of the master's dominion. These two ideals existed in tension with one another, not only for the enslaved and the master, but for the mistress, overseer, black driver, and any other persons building their home within the geography of the plantation. It is through this tension, and through the engagement with both ideals by plantation inhabitants, that individuals within the world of the plantation made their homes.

In this chapter, I have delineated and described two clear poles that anchored the spectrum of home practice evident in the historical record of plantation life. Between these two poles, and produced dialectically through the tension between them, lay myriad individual homes and the practices that composed them. Landless white men, for example, often produced fugitive homes in the marginal spaces between established plantations, while perhaps also seeking or idealizing dominion in a quest for stability, power, or wealth.[142] These men might use the practice of fugitivity to sustain a life that might eventually lead to a economic rise, at which point dominion might become the more appealing practice. A white planter-class woman might escape her husband's dominion through absenting herself from his home to visit family, while skirting the reach of her father's dominion or that of her sister's husband due to her still present position within her husband's plantation home. Her absence did not make her free from subjection to patriarchy writ-large, but she could perhaps find a moment in which the strictures of particular social structures had less grip on her life by moving her body

[142] McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds*.

beyond a boundary and into another "inside" that might not so clearly oppress her. Black drivers might find themselves versed in the language of the fugitive home and might find its spatial markers legible, but might also find themselves aligned with the ideologies of dominion or more firmly compelled by its promise of safety. In other words, their position within the hierarchy of the plantation might necessitate their practice of dominion or their striving for that ideal, despite their access or ties to the fugitive homes of the enslaved. White overseers might have oscillated between dominion and fugitivity in their home practice, particularly if they had families, desiring to be the patriarchal master of their wives and children, but resistant to the control of their employer or resentful of his demands and expectations. While a white overseer did not get marked as an instrument or object in the same way as the slaves he managed, the master did use the position of overseer as a repository for the ill-will or mis-management of his slaves.[143] Because of this, the overseer might have sought a freedom from this instrumentality through fugitive practices, attempting to find a kind of freedom that might escape the reach of the master's power.

Archival and historical materials are full of individual examples of home practices and conflicts that support the idea that neither of these idealized poles served as the single home practice for the majority of individuals, white or black. Home is a primarily individual act, and most of the tension between the two poles of the spectrum I propose lies in the conflict between desire to be free from domination and the existence of social hierarchies that deny an individual that ability. The practice of home wards off the

[143] Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects*.

precarity precipitated by engagement with these social structures and the added risks associated with the contingent nature of human life. Precariousness at the top of the social hierarchy grows out of the (perhaps hidden) knowledge that one's position in the world relies on the labor, subjection, and oppression of those beneath him or her, meaning that the foundation of one's home rests on the complicity of the oppressed with their own oppression. Precariousness at the bottom of the social hierarchy stems from the ever-present threat of violent domination or discipline. Home responds to one's relative position on such hierarchies to produce the maximum sense of protection possible within the circumscription of the social world.

The rest of this dissertation will examine texts and images from the 20th century for resonances with the framework of plantation home(s) I have just described. In particular, the strategies of the fugitive home delineated here draw a direct line between the practices of resistance on the plantation and the liberation and reimagining of black life by black artists in the 20th century. However, these later representations also reflect the presence of black dominion in eras of black economic ascension, as well as the limitations of the fugitive home as a strategy for black liberation. In all cases, however, both dominion and the fugitive home appear in literature and art produced by black authors and artists over the course of the 20th century, indicating their salience as categories of analysis.

Chapter Two—Possibility and Loss in the Underground: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

An entire dissertation could be written about the various homes in *Invisible Man* and what they communicate about strategies for black freedom. The most prominent home in the novel, however, and the one from which the whole of its story is narrated, is the underground room in which both the prologue and epilogue are set. In this space, the protagonist muses on his grandfather's riddle, speaks to an old slave woman, and steals electricity to power his turntable and his 1,369 lightbulbs, among other things. Although the novel begins in this room, the reader learns that the protagonist finds himself there at the end of a long journey—that his inhabitation of the underground room is the result of a set of experiences over the course of his life that culminated in his decision to remain below ground for some unstated amount of time. This chapter examines how the protagonist's exposure to two particular characters, both of whom inhabit fugitive homes, eventually leads to his decision to hibernate.

In this chapter, I argue that Ellison's text is itself a fugitive home for blackness within the white literary world of the 1950s. Writing amid the McCarthy-era push for conformity and allegiance to normative power structures, Ellison's novel masks its subversion through the invocation of fugitive strategies. Those characters that map the path to the underground for the protagonist inhabit stereotypes or social roles that could potentially dilute their threat. By creating a protagonist indoctrinated into dominion but exposed to fugitivity and allowing the reader to only see the world through his eyes,

Ellison produces an indeterminacy that keeps open the possibility of a subversive reading of the text. In this way, the novel resonates with strategies of fugitivity later delineated by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney in *The Undercommons* (2013).

However, despite Ellison's engagement with fugitive strategy, his novel remains ambivalent about the efficacy of such a strategy as a means of liberation, which accounts for the difficulty of understanding the novel's argument and the continued debates about Ellison's intentions and political alignments. The text characterizes the fugitive home as offering a reprieve from oppression rather than a path to complete liberation. While we find the protagonist at home in himself at the end of the novel, he remains outside of the social world and unaware of how or when to reintegrate. Ellison's text suggests that in the absence of racial democracy, fugitivity produces isolation and alienation rather than social connection and liberation.

This chapter will examine the novel's relationship to the fugitive home first by examining how Ellison's text was itself a fugitive home for blackness in the white literary world of the 1950s. Assuming then that the novel contains subversive presentations of black life that might not be immediately apparent, the rest of the chapter will examine two characters—the vet and Mary Rambo—each of whom the novel explicitly ties to the protagonist's underground home. I will conclude by describing how the novel as a whole holds dominion and fugitivity in tension, making no broad pronouncement about either's ultimate efficacy but revealing the limitations inherent to both.

INVISIBLE MAN AS FUGITIVE HOME IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Ellison, as much as his novels, has been read differently over the years, depending on the state of black political life and the current push in literary scholarship. Upon the first publication of the novel in 1952, the literary establishment and nascent "academic industry"[144] overwhelmingly embraced Ellison as an important spokesman for black America. Most reviews of the book and most of the critical work on it since its publication have emphasized its complicated, prescient presentation of blackness,[145] viewing it as an important departure from the limiting picture of black life presented in texts like Richard Wrights' *Native Son* (1940).

Certain critics and scholars, most famously Irving Howe, argued that Ellison's text had abandoned the important social realist conventions that made "good" protest literature, however. These critics view his belief in integrationism and faith in the principle of democracy as points of weakness in his social critique. Further, Houston Baker, Jr. has argued that the white literary establishment's embrace of Ellison actually stems from his failure to present an accurate picture of black dissent in the South. Evincing "failures of black critical memory,"[146] Baker charges the book with presenting "an accommodationist black folk populace"[147] rather than the rising "black southern public sphere" that would eventually produce the Civil Rights Movement and its

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[144] John F. Callahan, ed., *Ralph Ellison's* Invisible Man: *A Casebook* (New York: Oxford UP, 2004): 125.
[145] Both Callahan, *Ralph Ellison's* Invisible Man and Ross Posnock, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2005) provide an excellent curated overview of this literature.
[146] Houston Baker, *Critical Memory: Public Spheres, African American Writing, and Black Fathers and Sons in America* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001): 24.
[147] Ibid., 25.

attendant social change. Although Baker's earlier work on Ellison had been laudatory,[148] this later text views his "likability" among white critics as a mark of his political failure rather than his aesthetic success.

Kenneth W. Warren reminds us that *Invisible Man*, like many other important literary works, needs to be read as a product of its historical and cultural moment, however. He suggests that some of the inclination to critique Ellison grows out of a desire to see black experience as a "changing same,"[149] meaning that novels describing blackness are expected to remain timeless despite the fact of historical change. Warren argues that "perpetually shifting nomenclature used to refer to African-descended populations in the United States"[150] reflects the disappearance and emergence of social identities or the "social entity"[151] attached to each one. Ellison himself noted that the "American Negroes" of which he saw himself a part were a "Vanished Tribe,"[152] and Warren encourages scholars to read Ellison as "an extraordinary writer for the particular era in which he lived a good portion of his life."[153] Warren argues that the perceived possibilities for black aesthetics in Ellison's historical moment mediate his relationship to the white literary modernists he often cited as the "ancestors" of his work and to the white literary establishment which embraced him. Any critique of Ellison that fails to

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[148] Houston Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).
[149] Kenneth W. Warren, *So Black and Blue: Ralph Ellison and the Occasion of Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003): 7.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid.
[153] Ibid., 3.

recognize the historical circumscription of the black experience from which he writes necessarily misunderstands the meaning and importance of the novel.

I take seriously Warren's call to place Ellison in historical context. For one, Ellison's novel is published during the well-documented post-war push for integration that would eventually lead to *Brown v. Board of Eduction* in 1954 and the growth of the Civil Rights Movement. The novel's frustrated hope for the democratic inclusion of blackness within the national political imaginary reflects Ellison's investment in this integrationist movement. Having not seen how racism would perpetuate with difference in the post-Civil Rights Era, Ellison, like other black thinkers of the time, remained optimistic about the possibility of true democratic inclusion.[154] Secondly, Ellison writes this novel "during the harrowing days of McCarthyism,"[155] when the social and political climate demanded the performance of allegiance and an acquiescence to conformity. Baker's critique recognizes how this historical reality might have limited Ellison's ability to be subversive, but Baker does not forgive Ellison this "decision to 'hibernate'"[156] rather than to "praise, champion, or flesh out the revolutionary potential"[157] of black publics in both the north and south. Regardless of Ellison's success or failure in representing the potential of the black public, which I will take up later, the conformist

[154] Ellison's novel remains critical of accommodationist figures like Bledsoe, troubling an easy condemnation of his desire to locate himself within a white literary tradition as an attempt to elide his black identity.
[155] Baker, *Critical Memory,* 25.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid.

cultural climate of the era necessarily influenced how Ellison chose to write about black resistance to dominant, white-aligned power structures.

Third, Ellison's relationship to the institution of slavery would have been profoundly different than the relationship of critics and scholars writing about the novel in the late-20th and early-21st century. For Ellison, as for his protagonist, slavery was not a cultural memory but a generational or familial one. It would have been possible, and perhaps likely, for many contemporary black readers of *Invisible Man* to have had grandparents who were slaves or who had experienced the hope and disappointment of the era of Reconstruction. The possibilities and impossibilities of black life within the system of slavery would have been differently understood by someone of Ellison's generation, where the memory was more personal than cultural. This is not to undermine the ability of historiography or cultural memory to transmit information, but just to offer another lens which a careful reader ought to apply when analyzing the text's representation of fugitive homes.

Because of Ellison's generational or personal experience of slavery, Reconstruction, and the burgeoning mid-century Civil Right Movement, I question Baker's contention that Ellison evinces a "failure of black critical memory." I am more compelled by Warren's contention that "what has made possible the contradictory appropriations of Ralph Ellison's work is that his writing so effectively rings the changes on black political and social life"[158] during the first half of the 20th century. Later scholars have made visible the long historical record of black public activism leading up to the

[158] Warren, *So Black and Blue,* 19.

Civil Rights Movement, and Baker correctly points out that Ellison's text does not depict this subversive public as a fully-apparent and well-appointed whole. However, subversive figures appear throughout the novel, and a number of them suggest the presence of a black public unseen by the narrator but no less real.

Ellison's novel masks these characters, using symbols and social knowledge to communicate their disruptive potential to those who know what to look for while hiding them from those who might fear or resist this possibility of disruption. The author uses different strategies to hide different kinds of characters, wrapping many of them in the guise of stereotype or simplification to smuggle their subversive knowledge through. For all these subversive characters, however, Ellison's adroit use of a protagonist who perceives the world through the limited lens of his indoctrination into dominion serves as the central means by which the novel produces a fugitive home. The reader, if as unaware as the protagonist of the hidden meanings these subversive characters mean to communicate, is given no key to decode hidden knowledge. Like the grandfather's riddle which reappears throughout the text, the encrypted messages within *Invisible Man* fail to be fully or explicitly translated at any point. Rather, the novel just presents the riddle and leaves it to the reader to understand what the words might mean.

A few concrete examples from the scholarship on the novel will help illustrate this point. Larry Neal argues that Ellison's novel, as well as his general legacy, presents a much more complex picture than scholars often assume. To support this argument, Neal cites the presence of zoot suiters in *Invisible Man* alongside Ellison's own writing about the social function and symbolism of the zoot suit in American culture. Neal sees

Ellison's invocation of the zoot suit as reflective of Ellison's belief that in the "manipulation of cultural mechanisms [lies] the basis for black liberation."[159] The very presence of such fashion in *Invisible Man*, according to Neal, reveals that Ellison saw these clothes "mask[ing] deeper levels of social and symbolic activity"[160] which could be harnessed by black leadership toward the goal of social change.

However, *Invisible Man* never explicitly states why the zoot suit holds radical potential or what that radical potential is, exactly. The pages devoted to the zoot suiters in the novel emphasizes their location "outside the groove of history"[161] where the narrator envisions them "running and dodging the forces of history instead of making a dominating stand."[162] The protagonist comes to see himself in relation to them, as sharing their location beyond history: "Perhaps each hundred years or so men like them, like me, appeared in society, drifting through; and yet by all historical logic we, I, should have disappeared around the first part of the nineteenth century, rationalized out of existence."[163] History in the novel, via the rhetoric of the Brotherhood, becomes symbolic of a system of oppression that limits individual freedom. The zoot suiters' refusal to comply with the rational progress of history, then, comprises fugitive behavior. Beyond the novel, Ellison also wrote of the zoot suit that black leadership would be well-served to "learn the meaning of the myths and symbols which abound among the Negro

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[159] Callahan, *Ralph Ellison's* Invisible Man, 93.
[160] Ibid.
[161] Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 443. Citations are to the Vintage Books edition.
[162] Ibid., 441.
[163] Ibid., 442.

masses,"[164] of which this fashion is an example. However, neither in the novel nor in his other writing does Ellison ever name the meaning of the zoot suit nor call the zoot suit a source of liberation. Ellison knew the fashion masked something potentially liberatory, but he refused to define or describe exactly what that thing might be, leaving it to the reader to judge whether a position "outside the groove of history" helped or hurt the cause of black freedom.

A more complex and nuanced example comes from scholarship on Jim Trueblood, a sharecropper who appears early in the novel. While driving Mr. Norton, a wealthy white benefactor of his segregated Southern college, the protagonist ends up deciding to turn down a country road beyond the geographical boundary of the school. There, he and Norton come upon Trueblood's cabin, and the protagonist ends up revealing to Norton that Trueblood has been accused of incest, at least within the flows of gossip at the school. Norton is shocked (or excited) by this revelation, and he demands an audience with the sharecropper, who tells a long version of the story of his sin at the behest of Norton. Scholars, particularly since the 1970s, have characterized Trueblood as a trickster figure within the novel who plays with Norton's stereotypes of blackness and displaced incestuous desire to earn a $100 bill, to the chagrin of the protagonist.

However, these readings of Trueblood remain cautious, asserting the character's potential for indeterminacy more than giving a definitive reading. For example, Gillian Johns' 2007 article on Trueblood responds in large part to Houston Baker's 1984 analysis of the Trueblood episode in *Invisible Man*, in which Baker never questions the validity of

[164] Ralph Ellison, qtd. in Callahan, *Ralph Ellison's* Invisible Man, 91.

Trueblood's story of incest.[165] Johns' article raises the possibility that Trueblood is not just a good folk narrator but is actually fabricating the entire incident for the economic benefit of his family. Her reading bears quoting at length: "But isn't it possible that a sharecropper with two women in his family pregnant has the motive to make up a racialized 'dream' story—indeed, a tall tale exaggerating whatever 'polite' stories about black family life white men already tell—for greenhorn listeners who would relish a sexually extravagant narrative? And isn't it possible that he could—at least try to—turn the assumed abjection of his social location into aesthetic skill exploiting his listener's propensity to think himself safely—or invisibly—carried away by the rhetoric of desire displaced onto him?"[166] Johns argues that the trinary relationship of desire and shame created among the protagonist, Trueblood, and Norton serves to reveal the intraracial class-conflict between the elite or bourgeois black students and faculty at the school and the poor or working-class black farm families that surround them. Johns' intervention here is to extrapolate the blindness produced through allegiances with white elites on the part of the protagonist onto the scholarship of the novel that always took Trueblood's story as gospel. Neither does she definitively state that Trueblood's story is not true, however. Rather, she frames her argument within a series of "if" statements, exploring

[165] Gillian Johns, "Jim Trueblood and His Critic-Readers: Ralph Ellison's Rhetoric of Dramatic Irony and Tall Humor in the Mid-Century American Literary Public Sphere," T*exas Studies in Literature and Language* 49:3 (Fall 2007): 230-264. Johns writes, "Yet while [Baker] classifies *Invisible Man* generally as satire, because Trueblood tells a rich white man…that he has impregnated his daughter, he takes on faith that he has in fact done so." (243)
[166] Ibid., 243.

how it might alter a reading of the novel to presume Trueblood tells a tall tale without "offering a definitive truth."[167]

Johns' article raises reasonable doubts about the veracity of Trueblood's narrative, and I am compelled by her suggestion that the novel-reader's desire to accept the story as true is epistemologically aligned with Norton and the protagonist's desire to see it as true as well. However, a number of subtle moments in the Trueblood section offer the possibility of an alternative reading. Johns points to the moment when the protagonist tries to interrupt the story, and Trueblood "seem[s] to smile at [him] behind his eyes"[168] when Norton demands the story continue. Johns suggests that this is a "rhetorical 'wink'"[169] suggesting that the story might be fabricated. At the end of the long narrative, Trueblood describes what has happened to his family since the story got out, ending by saying, "The nigguhs up at the school don't like me, but the white folks treats me fine."[170] This loaded line is followed in the text by a line break, after which the narrator's voice returns to say, "He was some farmer."[171] If we read this moment in light of Johns' argument, seeing Trueblood as con-man rather than fool, the narrator could be suggesting a parallel between the practice of cultivating a farm as a source of economic security and Trueblood's narration. Although the protagonist remains confused about Trueblood's intention and the veracity of his story, the narrator—writing years later from the underground—might be more aware in hindsight of the game or gamble which he

[167] Ibid., 245.
[168] Ibid., 61.
[169] Ibid., 245.
[170] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 8.
[171] Ibid., 68.

once witnessed.[172] Trueblood's tale might be a crop the character has cultivated, and Norton's $100 bill his harvest.

Just as with the zoot suiters and the other indeterminate characters within the text, the novel never definitively tells us exactly how to read Trueblood's tale. The indeterminacy created through Trueblood's winks and the signifying content of his descriptions of all the help he has gotten provide room to read the character as more subversive than it might appear on the surface. Trueblood reveals how a cunning storyteller can trade on the displaced taboo sexual desires of a white man and his stereotypical beliefs about black people to improve the financial situation of his family in a time of dire need. Many scholars point to Trueblood's note that in order not to sin when he wakes up sleeping with his daughter, he has to "move without movin'."[173] A perfect encapsulation of fugitivity as I theorize it in this dissertation, Trueblood here describes the fact that without being able to escape the heavy burden of racism, stereotype, and limited economic possibility, he had to find a way to support two new children who were due to arrive at the same time. So he digs in to the stereotype, monetizes it, performs it for the right (white) audiences, and his financial situation vastly improves. The protagonist hates Trueblood for perpetuating a stereotype because the protagonist feels beholden to white perceptions of blackness. Trueblood, however, builds his life beyond-but-within the boundaries of white geography. Having no reason to interact with

[172] Indeed, these disagreements between the consciousness of the protagonist and the later awareness of the narrator is one of the primary mechanisms through which the text produces the indeterminacy necessary to protect its fugitive characters and knowledges.
[173] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 59.

structures of power that privilege whiteness, Trueblood can protect his family by wrapping them in stereotype, hiding his home through an intentional messiness. In this way, Trueblood registers as a fugitive character within the text, hidden not only from Norton and the protagonist, but hidden also from readers who share their epistemologies.

It is unlikely that Ellison would have viewed Trueblood as a resistant or liberated character, however. Ellison's writing on the stereotype *Shadow and Act* argues that reductive cultural perceptions erase the humanity of those whom they reflect.[174] In "Change the Yoke and Slip the Joke," he also critiques black minstrels for performing, as Trueblood does in the novel, a damaging stereotype and thereby reifying it in the minds of a white audience.[175] As I will discuss at more length later, Ellison's novel remains ambivalent about its fugitive characters, critiquing them even as it describes their potential power. Trueblood's ability to extract sustenance from a white man through cunning and a masterful manipulation of the ideologies of power locates subversive potential in a place few white or black middle-class readers, particularly at the time, might have expected to see it. However, his decision to sustain his family in this way alienates him from the wider black community, particularly the bourgeois black world of the campus. As with other fugitive characters in the novel, the price Trueblood pays for the limited security of the fugitive home is alienation from the larger social community.

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[174] Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act* (1964; repr. New York: Vintage Books, 1995). Citations are to the Vintage Books edition. Ellison discusses this at multiple points in the text, particularly in "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the BLack Mask of Humanity," "Richard Wright's Blues," and "The World and the Jug."

[175] Ibid., 49.

However, my purpose in this section is to argue that Ellison's novel contains subversive characters that the novel masks through narrative strategies that mimic fugitivity, and the Trueblood episode is an excellent example of this. The subtle winks along with the potential for disagreement between the protagonist and the narrator all function to create confusion and indeterminacy around the veracity and purpose of Trueblood's tale. A reader can see Trueblood as pure stereotype as easily as Norton does, but Ellison imbues the scene with the potential for a more complicated reading. In the conformist era in which he wrote, however, and writing to the mostly white literary elite who would receive and judge his novel, Ellison masks Trueblood so that readers who might be threatened by his ability to manipulate a rich white man can see him as a fool instead. This subtle masking appears multiple times over the course of the novel, indicating that, at least in part, Ellison's project was to write a subversive novel that would not automatically be read that way.

The novel's use of fugitive strategy to mask its subversive characters resonates with Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's writing on the role of the intellectual in *The Undercommons*. Although Moten and Harney focus on the neoliberal university, their assertion that "it cannot be denied that the university is a place of refuge, and it cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment"[176] seems equally applicable to other forms of intellectual life. At mid-century, the U.S. fought the Cold War on a cultural front as much as on a military or economic one. Investment in the arts and the

[176] Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013): 26.

creation of a culture industry produced a space of refuge for a thinker and writer like Ellison, who was able to support himself through writing and speaking for the rest of his life. However, the notion that this culture industry could bear full depictions of all facets of social life in the U.S. seems fallacious. Faced with the possibility and limitation of producing intellectual and aesthetic work within this structure, Ellison found himself in a similar position to the fugitive intellectuals Moten and Harney describe. The question becomes, then, whether Ellison's presence in the predominantly white literary world of the 1950s complied with their call to "abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission…to be in but not of."[177]

Ellison's legacy as a public figure occludes an easy assertion that the writer ran rouge through the systems that surrounded him. Early on, white literary scholars embraced the writer, and he wrote often about his own aesthetic inheritance from white literary modernists. In the 1970s, at the height of Afrocentrism and the Black Arts Movement, Ellison often found himself on the defensive about his investment in this legacy when speaking to college audiences.[178] However, Moten and Harney insist that the black fugitivity they propose derives from "from the 'runaway tongues' and eloquent

[177] Ibid.

[178] In Shanna Greene Benjamin's article on *Invisible Man*, she relays a story from Arnold Rampersad's biography of Ellison about a confrontation Ellison had with a young black militant who accused him of being an "Uncle Tom." According to the biography, Ellison responded eloquently to the student but broke down after the confrontation, crying, "I'm not a Tom! I'm not a Tom!" This story reflects the difficult cultural position of Ellison as a thinker and a speaker—seen as the voice of blackness for white mid-century audiences, but too friendly with those white audiences for the liking of later black audiences. I suggest that positioning Ellison as a kind of literary fugitive offers a more nuanced way to understand this cultural position.

vulgarities encrypted in works and days that turn out to be of the native or the slave only insofar as the fugitive is misrecognized."[179] This is to say that works that might appear to be "of the native or the slave" in reality encrypt a fugitive intellectual practice that persists by benefit of being hidden within misrecognition. Ellison, and particularly *Invisible Man*, fit more easily into this construction of the fugitive. So much of Ellison's writing on literature, and even about his own literature, worked to suss out how both the "pre-individualistic black community"[180] of the south which produced the blues and the power structures that serve as infrastructure for white literature interfere with a black individual's ability to produce artistic work that is true to himself. *Invisible Man*, with its mixed depictions of both "folk" characters and all then-available paths to black liberation, exists "in" both of these worlds but refuses to be "of" either. This opens up space for an examination of how Ellison might have viewed what Moten and Harney call "the undercommons" and what possibilities and limitations he might have seen for it.

The strongest argument for Ellison's investment in an intellectual "underground" stems from the fact that his novel both begins and ends literally below ground. The home the protagonist/narrator makes below the streets of Harlem actually makes the whole of the novel possible. From this room, the narrator tells the bildungsroman of the rest of the novel, and in this space, the protagonist "hibernates" at the end of his journey. It is also in this space that the narrator learns that he is invisible and comes to appreciate that fact as a source of power rather than a form of disempowerment. He writes that after years of

[179] Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 48.
[180] Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, 90.

trying to "adopt the opinions of others…I finally rebelled. I am an *invisible* man."[181] This underground room provides the space for the existential questioning and creation necessary for the production of an individual humanity. Like Moten and Harney's university, this space is also a space of theft. In what the narrator calls his "battle with Monopolated Light & Power,"[182] he steals power from the electrical grid to run a turntable and to illuminate the 1,369 lightbulbs that line his underground home. He tells the reader this this fight "allows [him] to feel [his] vital aliveness."[183] His act of righteous theft, then, affirms his life. All of these aspects of the narrator's underground home indicate that Ellison recognized some benefit to the kind of fugitive lifestyle it symbolizes.

However, as many scholars have noted, the underground functions as a space of alienation for the protagonist as well. Unlike the undercommons imagined by Moten and Harney, populated with other fugitives who sustain one another, Ellison imagines this fugitive home as a space of disconnection from community. This alienation forms the core of Ellison's critique of fugitive strategy. While the narrator promises that he will one day emerge from his bunker, the bunker itself does not produce the means of broad liberation for black people, nor does it clarify to the protagonist what that path to liberation might be. Ellison's text does not begin and end within a fugitive community, but rather within an isolated space of fugitivity inhabited by a single person.

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[181] Ellison, *Invisible Man,* 573
[182] Ibid., 7.
[183] Ibid.

This anxiety about the impact of fugitive strategy differentiates Ellison's relationship to the underground from that described in *The Undercommons*. While Ellison's text resonates with the later theoretical work, he challenges their call to disobedience by asking what the costs might be. Moten and Harney recognize that risk persists in the fugitive space they imagine, as it is "open for refuge even though it may let in police agents and destruction."[184] The undercommons, they say, is "always an unsafe neighborhood,"[185] under threat from cultural forces both within and without it. Ellison, due in part to his historical proximity to both the violence of Jim Crow and the ostracizing punishment of the Red Scare, seems less inclined to throw the door open, "no questions asked."[186] Because of the pre-Civil Rights historical position of Ellison's novel, it remains both optimistic that black life might flourish within a racially-inclusive American democracy and ambivalent about the impact of fugitivity on black people. Unlike Moten, Harney, and other critics writing in the present era of persistent anti-black violence amid black social and political ascension, Ellison still believed that America would be capable of fulfilling its democratic promise for its black citizens and worried at how a rejection of dominant culture might negatively impact black individuals and the cause of black freedom writ large.

Ellison's ambivalence about fugitivity in the novel, particularly with regard to how fugitive characters and their homes influence the protagonist on his journey, allows us to better understand the possibilities and limitations of fugitivity in Ellison's historical

[184] Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*, 38
[185] Ibid., 28.
[186] Ibid., 38.

era. In the next section, I will discuss two fugitive characters I view as critically important to the development of the protagonist due to their influence on his decision to move underground.[187] Ellison's protagonist remains ambivalent about both, reflecting Ellison's own ambivalence, as well as his desire to hide the sustaining potential of fugitive homes from a potentially unsafe audience. Ellison's novel both describes their fugitivity and produces a fugitive home for them, imbuing his text with the potential for subversion that might emerge, like the narrator himself, when the "next phase"[188] begins.

THE VET AND RESTRICTIVE FREEDOM

One character who offers the protagonist an early glimpse into the subversive potential of fugitivity is a veteran he meets at the Golden Day. Following the episode with Trueblood discussed earlier in this chapter, Norton demands the protagonist take

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[187] Mary Rambo, one of these characters, appears prominently in the literature on the novel. She is ancestral, folk, and female, making her a necessary part of many traditional readings of the novel. See the section on her for a review of this literature. The vet, however, who is the other character I take up here, has less of a presence in scholarship. While I see him as a categorically fugitive character, he generally gets eclipsed by Rinehart, who more obviously plays with identity and disappears within the social system of Harlem. For example, Morris Dickstein's chapter in Callahan, ed. *Ralph Ellison's* Invisible Man sees Rinehart as the "principle of hope" offering freedom to black people which the Brotherhood could not. In Lisa Yaszek, "An Afrofuturist Reading of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man," *Rethinking History* 9:2/3 (June/Sept 2005): 297-313, she argues that Rinehart embodies possibility in the novel and is one of the characters that allows us to read it as a novel of futurity. Rinehart, unlike the vet, however, also suggests a potential "cynicism" (Joseph F. Trimmer, "The Grandfather's Riddle in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man," *Black American Literature Forum* 12:2 (Summer 1978): 46-50) in that he seems to stand for nothing and to be everything to everyone without having a real identity. While this idea also speaks to my argument about Ellison's ambivalence toward fugitivity, I choose in this chapter to focus on the vet to emphasize the aspects of fugitivity that produce selfhood, rather than emptying my portrayal of fugitive practice of that important purpose.

[188] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 576

him somewhere for a drink to help him deal with the shock of the sharecropper's story. Being in the rural area beyond the boundaries of his college's campus, the protagonist makes the forced choice to take the man to a local tavern and brothel called the Golden Day. As they drive closer to the establishment, the protagonist sees a line of "shellshocked"[189] veterans from a nearby mental hospital also on their way to the bar. The narrator tells the reader that many of these men had been members of the professions prior to their institutionalization, and that even now he "could never believe that they were really patients."[190]

Even upon first encountering them, these veterans are imbued with an indeterminacy that challenges the perception that they are simply mad. Rather, they are what Moten and Harney would call "unprofessional"[191] men—once part of the professional organizational structure to which the protagonist aspires but now in violation of its social code. The narrator tells the reader that these men live in community with one another, "play[ing] some vast and complicated game with me and the rest of the school folk, a game whose goal was laughter and whose rules and subtleties I could never grasp."[192] For example, when two of the veterans come outside to help him carry Norton back into the bar, one of them says, "Look, Sylvester, it's Thomas Jefferson!" and the other responds, "I was just about to say, I've long wanted to discourse with him!" The

[189] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 73.
[190] Ibid., 74.
[191] Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons,* 28.
[192] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 74.

protagonist "look[s] at them speechlessly; they were both crazy. Or were they joking?"[193] Although the two veterans share a reality in this moment—both of them either see Thomas Jefferson or understand the joke—the protagonist lacks the social grammar to interpret the meaning of their communication.

Both the fact that they could "pass" for something other than patients and the fact that the protagonist cannot discern the meaning of their communication point to the existence of a fugitive home practiced by these men. As discussed in the first chapter, narrative practices work in tandem with spatial or material arrangements to produce the structures of the fugitive home. Here, the veterans engage in fugitive speaking practices that confound the protagonist by refusing to be recognizable as either joke or madness. Indeed, the "jokes" here resonate with the heavily-studied practice of "signifying," mentioned in the previous chapter. Signifying is a black American linguistic/rhetorical practice whose presence has been traced back to slavery. Drawing from Roger D. Abrahams' definition, Henry Louis Gates describes signifying[194] as a figurative, indirect form of communication that allows those engaging in the practice to name or play a joke on someone without addressing him/her directly. Gates usefully refers to signifying as "the slave's trope, the trope of tropes,"[195] noting that these kinds of linguistic and rhetorical practices emerge from the condition of enslavement. Although Gates does not

[193] Ibid., 77.
[194] Gates' text theorizes the practice and argues that the practice has already theorized the black literary tradition, using the term "Signifyin(g)" to emphasize this theoretical category. I choose here not to use this specialized terminology because while Ellison might be Signifyin(g), the veterans are more likely signifying, in keeping with their fugitive character. See Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*.
[195] Ibid., 52.

explicitly call signifying a fugitive practice, its ability to hide meaning in plain sight and its location "perpendicular"[196] to the dominant/white linguistic universe aligns this discursive practice with the other forms of fugitivity that descend from the world of plantation slavery. In this moment, then, the veterans' linguistic play evinces one function of fugitivity, which is to allow a critique of those in power that can be hidden in plain sight within a world structured by oppressive ideologies.[197]

The character I am calling "the vet," engages in similar narrative strategies. The vet is an ex-doctor and patient at the asylum who helps the protagonist with Norton during his fainting spell at the Golden Day. After Norton has been carried upstairs into one of the brothel rooms, the vet appears to help bring the white man back to consciousness. However, the vet also takes advantage of this privileged position to communicate hidden knowledge to the protagonist perpendicularly, by having a conversation that appears to be with Norton. The protagonist, anxious about having brought Norton to the Golden Day, keeps encouraging him to leave. The vet suggests that the protagonist might go downstairs and wait for them, but then changes his mind, saying, "Perhaps if I had overheard some of what I'm about to tell you when I was a student up there on the hill, I wouldn't be the casualty that I am."[198] Here, the vet clearly indicates that he does not intend to communicate directly with the protagonist, but rather

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[196] Ibid., 49.
[197] This idea also appears in Christina Sharpe's discussion of the cakewalk. See pages 217-218 of this dissertation.
[198] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 91.

to show him something indirectly by allowing him to "overhear" his conversation with Norton.

However, the protagonist's naiveté and ideological commitments undermine the usefulness of this perpendicular conversation. First, the vet describes the circumstances under which he finds himself in a mental institution. He tells Norton and the protagonist that he was driven out of the town in which he practiced medicine and beaten by a gang of whites "for saving a human life."[199] After telling this story, he then asks the protagonist if he understands what happened, and the protagonist responds that he doesn't know if he understands or not. The vet explains to Norton that despite the protagonist's "eyes and ears and…good distended African nose,"[200] he cannot "understand the simple facts of life."[201] Here, the vet obliquely refers to what many scholars of the novel have called "folk knowledge," or an ancestral or experiential way-of-knowing which Ellison differentiates from the sociological epistemologies he critiques throughout the text. Similarly, when Norton asks the vet how long he was in France, the vet tells him that he was there "long enough to forget some fundamentals which I should never have forgotten."[202] When Norton does not understand his meaning, he says the things he forgot were, "Such things as most peasants and folk peoples almost always know through experience, though seldom through conscious thought."[203] In both these cases, the vet explicitly links "folk peoples" with the kinds of knowledge that help black persons

[199] Ibid., 93.
[200] Ibid., 94.
[201] Ibid.
[202] Ibid., 91.
[203] Ibid.

navigate in and survive a world dominated by white supremacy and its attendant forms of power. Although derisively suggesting that these epistemologies do not descend from "conscious thought," the vet here reiterates the assertion that folk characters hold knowledge that supports black survival and life.

The protagonist has lost his connection to these folk epistemologies, however, and the vet suggests that this is because he functions as a source of support for dominion through his allegiance with its ideologies, despite his low position within its hierarchies and his phenotypical blackness. As mentioned in the first chapter, dominion demands the acquiescence of those within its geography of power in order to function, and can be disrupted by the refusal of those who should be disempowered according to the logic of dominion to recognize the power that someone holds over them. When the vet asks the protagonist to understand the story of his trauma and the protagonist is unable to do so, the vet realizes that the protagonist has lost touch with or has never had the type of knowledge or experience that might lead to a disinvestment in the forms of power, such as dominion, attached to whiteness and to white men like Norton. The vet tells Norton that the protagonist is "invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!"[204] By noting that the

[204] Ibid., 94. While the choice of language on the part of the vet—"mechanical man"—does not directly reference enslavement, both Scott Selisker and Bill Brown's articles on *Invisible Man* discuss the social relevance of automata in the 20th century and how such objects resonate with the historical dual-status of the enslaved as human and property.□1 The vet names the protagonist as an object that moves but which retains no access to humanity, referencing the aspect of slavery that stripped black persons of their humanity in order to symbolically convert them into usable objects. This man-as-object then exists to serve Norton's sense of himself and to constitute a portion of his sphere of control or

protagonist is the "most perfect achievement" of Norton's dreams, he references the fact that Norton enacts dominion over the black college that the protagonist attends, understanding the students there not as individual agents but as part of his "destiny."[205] By causing the protagonist to repress his humanity, then, Norton has created the ideal subject to shore up his sense of power and has also restricted the protagonist's ability to recognize and understand fugitive communication.

The vet's "freedom" does stir something within the protagonist, however. When the vet begins talking to Norton upstairs at the Golden Day, the narrator tells the reader that "the vet was acting toward the white man with a freedom which could only bring on trouble."[206] First, the vet tells Norton that if the veterans downstairs at the Golden Day "suddenly realize that you are what you are…your life wouldn't be worth a piece of bankrupt stock."[207] He goes on to describe how the other veterans "are beyond money, and with Supercargo [their attendant] down…they know nothing of value."[208] Here, the vet couches his criticisms of Norton in the guise of a warning—rather than directly confronting the white man, he makes it appear as though he is telling him a secret truth.

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power. In this way, the relationship between Norton and the protagonist figures the relationship between master and slave within the geography of the plantation. See Bill Brown, "Reification, Reanimation, and the American Uncanny," *Critical Inquiry* 32:2 (Winter 2006): 175-207; Scott Selisker, "'Simply by Reacting?': The Sociology of Race and Invisible Man's Automata," *American Literature* 83:3 (Sept 2011): 571-596.

[205] Norton first says this on page 41 and also repeats it later during his conversation with the vet. When Norton originally tells the protagonist that he is part of his destiny, it causes the protagonist to see himself as aligned with Norton and as sharing a great project with him. This resonates with many other forms of white supremacy and power descending from and contemporary with the American system of slavery.

[206] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 93.

[207] Ibid.

[208] Ibid.

He also suggests the detachment of the veterans from the systems of belief with which both Norton and the protagonist align themselves. He tells Norton that these veterans are "beyond money," which disconnects them from the values that shore up dominion. Rather than seeking wealth, property, or other forms of capitalist ownership, the veterans recognize neither money nor "value"—a play on words that asserts that they neither support a capitalist system of valuation nor align themselves with the "values" that someone like Norton or the protagonist might hold. He explains that the veterans downstairs might see Norton as anything from "the great white father" to "the lyncher of souls,"[209] which both the protagonist and Norton protest.

When Norton and the protagonist take offense at the vet's connection between Norton and a "lyncher," the vet responds that this "is an issue which I can confront only by evading it."[210] As I described in the last chapter, antagonizing dominion by evading its agents and structures is one of the most prominent characteristics of the fugitive as I am theorizing it here.[211] The vet follows this statement with his story about being "[driven] out of the city at midnight and beat[en] with whips"[212] for practicing medicine. Having returned from France, the vet believed his "knowledge could bring [him] dignity"[213]—that he could confront the ideologies that supported his oppression on their own terms and find himself liberated from them. He found that not to be the case, however. In this moment with Norton, therefore, he confronts the "issue"—white supremacy, the

[209] Ibid.
[210] Ibid.
[211] For more on the idea of antagonism, see pages 155-156 of this dissertation.
[212] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 93.
[213] Ibid.

limitations of racial liberalism, the influence of capitalism, and whatever other structures Norton might represent—by "evading" it. This statement makes explicit the fugitive communication strategies the vet employs throughout the rest of this exchange. He tries to share fugitive knowledge with the protagonist perpendicularly, hiding this potentially subversive conversation within his conversation with Norton. He also criticizes Norton obliquely, by offering a description of how the men downstairs would judge him rather than offering the judgment from his own perspective. In both cases, he employs the narrative practices of fugitivity to hide his meaning and its resistance to domination within another kind of speech.

The whole of this encounter between the vet and Norton makes the protagonist profoundly uncomfortable. However, he also "receive[s] a fearful satisfaction from hearing him talk as he had to a white man."[214] The protagonist uses the word "freedom" to describe how the vet comports himself around Norton and enjoys the experience of seeing a black man act with such freedom. However, that enjoyment comes tempered by a fear, and this ambivalence within the protagonist reflects the critiques the novel wishes to make about the possibilities for freedom within a fugitive home. Toward the end of the scene, the vet gives up his fugitive practice, directly confronting both the protagonist and Norton about their inability to see one another as anything other than objects. However, as the confrontation nearly turns violent, the protagonist ushers Norton out, leaving the vet in the room "making a sound that was a blending of laughter and tears."[215] Norton

[214] Ibid.
[215] Ibid., 95.

says to the protagonist, "Hurry, the man is as insane as the rest,"[216] attributing his statements to madness rather than deft perception of the structures of racial oppression.

This assignation of truth to madness resonates with the fugitive practice of manipulating expectations or stereotypes to the end of finding spaces of freedom. In the same way as slaves on a plantation might be fine with being perceived as unfit for certain domestic tasks if that lightened their workload, so the vet is fine with being seen as insane if that means he can speak with relative freedom to a powerful white man like Norton. To the protagonist, however, being marked as insane does not register as a source of freedom. Indoctrinated into the ideologies of dominion—as the vet says, "that great false wisdom taught sales and pragmatists alike, that white is right"—the protagonist takes "fearful satisfaction" in the vet's antagonism of Norton. He enjoys bearing witness to black freedom, but he fears what reprisals such freedom might bring.

Indeed, the vet's physical immobility or restriction functions as a central vehicle for Ellison's critique of the possibilities of fugitivity. The veterans in the asylum have created a fugitive home for themselves as fallen professionals, unable to live within the structures of normalizing or normative society, but their presence in this home necessitates their alienation from a broader community. In the case of the vet, the "freedom" which the protagonist notes is paradoxical, as life in an asylum would have been almost constantly monitored. Despite his bodily unfreedom, however, the vet recognizes that he can seize a momentary freedom within the chaos ensuing at the Golden Day, in order to confront or confound a system of power and its attendant ideology. The

[216] Ibid.

possibilities for his fugitive home are circumscribed by his physical immobility and restriction. Although he is "free," Ellison suggests that his liberation is less than complete.

The vet and the protagonist meet again a few scenes later on a bus, after the protagonist's confrontation with Bledsoe. The protagonist has been sent to New York in what he will come to find out was a punishment for his revealing both Trueblood and the veterans at the Golden Day to Norton. Similarly, after his own run-in with Norton, the vet has been transferred to St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, D.C. On their journeys north, the protagonist and the vet encounter one another in the "Jim Crow"[217] section of their shared bus. During their conversation, the vet more explicitly directs the protagonist to shift his way of interacting with the world, although the protagonist still fails to understand what the vet communicates. For example, the vet tells the protagonist that he had been asking to be transferred away from the school for a year, but they kept refusing his request. He tells the protagonist that "the ways of authority are indeed mysterious,"[218] and says he "can't help but wonder" if his transfer is related to his conversation with Norton and the potential threat he now presents against the interests of the school. His language here is obtuse and suggestive, feigning ignorance as to what changed his circumstances but implying that perhaps his manipulation of the system was intentional.[219] The protagonist, still in his fog of naiveté, asks how Norton could have

[217] Ibid., 155. This is what Crenshaw, the vet's attendant calls the bus section.
[218] Ibid., 153.
[219] My reading here means to suggest the same kind of indeterminacy which Johns brings to her reading to Trueblood. I do not wish to argue that the vet definitively controlled his

anything to do with it, and the vet responds, "How could he have anything to do with your being on this bus?"[220] The vet then winks at the protagonist, a subtle gesture like the smile behind Trueblood's eyes that means to communicate something secret to the protagonist, but the wink falls flat. As in the conversation at the Golden Day and during his encounter with Trueblood, the protagonist misses the hidden message because he lacks the requisite "folk" knowledge to interpret what he witnesses. The protagonist lacks the grammar to understand what the vet wishes to communicate to him about how the world functions.

In response to the protagonist's lack of understanding, the vet more explicitly directs the protagonist to "learn to look beneath the surface,"[221] a piece of advice that foreshadows the protagonist's eventual retreat to the underground spaces of New York. In the paragraph of advice that follows, the vet articulates a fugitive ideology that riffs on the advice the protagonist received from his grandfather on his deathbed:[222] "Play the game, but don't believe in it—that much you owe yourself. Even if it lands you in a strait jacket or a padded cell. Play the game, but play it your own way—part of the time at

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circumstances, but that perhaps he was an adroit gambler whose skill normally gets missed by readers of the novel.

[220] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 153.

[221] Ibid.

[222] The grandfather's riddle refers to the advice the protagonist received from his grandfather on the old man's deathbed, which appears on page 16 of the novel: "Son, after I'm gone I want you to keep up the good fight. I never told you, but our life is a war and I have been a traitor all my born days, a spy in the enemy's country ever since I give up my gun back in the Reconstruction. Live with your head in the lion's mouth. I want you to overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open." This advice returns with regularity in the narrative, meaning something slightly different each time to the developing protagonist.

least. Play the game, but raise the ante, my boy. Learn how it operates, learn how *you* operate—I wish I had time to tell you only a fragment…You're hidden right out in the open—that is, you would be if you only realized it." In this paragraph, the vet describes a form of fugitivity that might lead to less physical freedom of movement but which will enable the protagonist to seek and experience a freedom in selfhood. The vet communicates a fugitive ideology by using the figure of "the game" to stand in for the set of ideologies and social structures or "rules" that regulate the normative and gird power for those in positions of dominance. He suggests that the protagonist stop believing in the game, meaning that he needs to reject the ideologies that oppress him rather than supporting his disempowerment by shoring them up. The vet then tells the protagonist that "part of the time at least," he should play the game his "own way." The vet recognizes that living as a fugitive[223] demands a recognition of one's proximity and vulnerability to power, but he still suggests that when possible, the protagonist manipulate the structures around him to his own ends. He concludes by telling the protagonist that he needs to learn how the game operates, as well as learning how he as an individual operates, so that he might begin to recognize that he is "hidden right out in the open"—that his invisibility garners him a kind of power that might be mobilized to

[223] The vet later in this section compares the protagonist to earlier generations of men who escaped the south for the north, saying, "He's going free, in the broad daylight and alone. I can remember when young fellows like him had first to commit a crime, or be accused of one, before they trie such a thing. Instead of leaving in the light of morning, they went in the dark of night." When his attendant balks at the suggestion that he himself might have been a criminal when he fled north, the vet tells him, "There's always an element of crime in freedom…" (155) See my discussion of this statement below.

the end of "beating the game,"[224] or creating the ability to live as an individual beyond the oppressive ideologies that structure his world.

The vet's advice in many ways resonates with the idea of freedom within systems described by Moten and Harney in *The Undercommons*. Beyond just his recognition that freedom can be had within oppressive structures, he also suggests to his keeper on the train that "there's always an element of crime in freedom."[225] Moten and Harney recognize the inherent theft that defines the relationship between their fugitive subject and the structures that surround him or her. For them, as well as for the vet, this connection between criminality and freedom stems from the foundational black experience of enslavement. In a system wherein black persons seizing freedom were often literally stealing themselves from their master, freedom itself was necessarily a crime of theft. The vet aligns ideologically with this fugitive sense of what freedom demands and how freedom within an oppressive structure comes to pass.

Of course, the vet's suggestion to "look beneath the surface" and his assertion that the protagonist could find power in his invisibility eventually materialize in the narrator's underground home. However, the novel delineates the sacrifice such fugitivity entails, creating an ambivalence about the "freedom" the character appears to possess. His ability to speak freely with Norton—his fugitivity from the ideologies of white supremacy and capitalism that delimit the protagonist's interactions with Norton—stems from his status as a patient at an asylum. When he advises the protagonist to try to alter his worldview,

[224] Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 154.
[225] Ibid., 155.

he specifically states that such efforts might land you in an "strait jacket or a padded cell," but that such a reality would be better than living within the oppressive system with which the protagonist currently aligns himself. This lack of physical autonomy is no small sacrifice, however, and the invocation of the strait jacket and padded cells implies that such a worldview might lead to one's forced removal from the general population of society and into an institution meant to sequester non-normative elements away from the normative social world. While the vet endorses this choice, and while the narrator makes the eventual choice to follow a similar path, the social location of a "padded room" reflects the alienation that Ellison's novel argues derives from such fugitive practice.[226] The vet might be free, but he must also be disconnected.

MARY RAMBO'S FUGITIVE HOME

However, not all of the fugitive characters in the novel trade alienation for freedom. Mary Rambo, unlike the vet, remains connected to a social world of black people while also inhabiting a fugitive home. Many critiques of the novel, particularly since the 1970s, have pointed out the limited appearances and stereotypical presentation of women in the novel, with particular focus on Mary Rambo and Sybil. However, a handful of scholars have worked to expand intellectual understanding of the role of Mary

[226] Roderick Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004) sees the vet as a figure of "African American deviancy" (66) to which black attempts at normative modernity remain mired. Figures like this for Ferguson reveal the "fictions" of conformity for black subjects, but Ferguson suggests these are figures that critique, rather than figures Ellison meant to critique. I am compelled by his thinking on the novel, but I also seek to root my own argument in Ellison's historical location and worldview, which alters the liberatory potential of a character like the vet, regardless his relative social freedom.

Rambo in the text by using the excised portions of her narrative, published in 1963 under the title "Out of the Hospital and Under the Bar." In this story, Mary is a nurse at the paint factory hospital and actually helps the protagonist escape his confinement there, rather than just nursing him back to health after he escapes to Harlem. Scholars have used this longer meditation on Mary, along with Ellison's own suggestion that she deserved a bit more space in the novel, to push back against the idea that Ellison's novel failed to include dynamic female characters. Mary in particular gets attached to the Mammy stereotype in much of the writing on the novel—a reading which the later publication of this story helped to complicated.

However, I argue that Mary's characterization in the 1952 version of the text should not limit a reader's understanding of her character as a fugitive within the system of the city nor reduce her to a simplified stereotype. While her portrayal in the novel does appear to owe much to stereotypes on the first pass, I want to suggest that this reading of the character borrows too much from the protagonist's own limited worldview and ignores important but subtle moments of irony and critique in the scenes that take place in her home. In other words, reading Mary as a stereotype reflects Ellison's desire to hide Mary's subversive humanity within an unthreatening image more than it reveals an oversimplification of women on the part of the author.

Claudia Tate's important essay on the women characters in *Invisible Man* suggests that not just Mary but most of the women in the novel have been misread in much of the dominant scholarship on the text. Her opening assertion that "we must not

neglect what lies hidden behind the mask and proclaim that the mask is the face"[227] informs my desire to read Mary and her home as more complicated narrative spaces that they might seem at first look. Tate roots her argument in Ellison's own discussion of how stereotypes can "frequently hide complex aspects of human character,"[228] pushing through the surface representations of the women in the text to better understand how they direct and instruct the protagonist in his development as an individual. She writes, "The possibility for his escape is directly related to his ability to distill meaning from his encounters with the women I have mentioned."[229] Although Tate makes a case for each of the major women characters in the novel communicating some existential truth to the protagonist, Mary Rambo in particular serves as a major source of discomfort, protection, and growth for the protagonist, making her narrative a particularly fruitful place to uncover "what lies hidden behind the mask" of Ellison's satire.

The protagonist first meets Mary after arriving in Harlem via subway following his escape from the paint factory hospital. He faints as he emerges from the underground station, and Mary insists that he come home with her to recover, arguing that his room at Men's House "ain't no place for nobody in your condition what's weak and needs a woman to keep an eye on you awhile."[230] She and another resident of the neighborhood take the protagonist back to her home where she puts him to bed and gives him a glass of water. When he sees her "worn brown fingers" holding the glass, he experiences an "old,

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[227] Callahan, *Ralph Ellison's* Invisible Man, 253.
[228] Ibid., 254.
[229] Ibid., 255.
[230] Ellison, *Invisible Man,* 252

almost forgotten relief."[231] Even in this first moment with Mary, the sight of her hand elicits a remembered comfort from the protagonist. Later, the protagonist refers to her as "a force, a stable, familiar force like something out of my past which kept me from whirling off into some unknown which I dared not face."[232] The novel never names this relief or explicitly states the source of this familiarity. Nebulous language reflects the protagonist's inability to locate Mary within his set of individual memories. While other markers of "folk," such as the yams the protagonist eats on the street, connect directly to the protagonist's individual memories of particular places and experiences, Mary does not remind the protagonist of a specific person, or even of the "people he knew down South," as other characters do. Rather, Mary signifies something larger—an almost forgotten force that anchors and guards the protagonist. Mary conjures a cultural memory, rather than an individual one.

Shanna Greene Benjamin argues for Mary's role as ancestral guide for the protagonist. Although Benjamin relies on the expanded narrative of Mary Rambo present in Ellison's short story, her claim that "Mary is a physical link between contemporary thought and ancestral wisdom [that] facilitates the transmission of knowledge from the latter to the former"[233] remains true for the character in the 1952 text of the novel as well. Borrowing from Toni Morrison's writing on the role of the ancestor in fiction, Benjamin argues that Mary "affirm[s] the value of community and…uses her wisdom to maintain

[231] Ibid., 253.
[232] Ibid., 258.
[233] Shanna Greene Benjamin, "There's Something About Mary: Female Wisdom and the Folk Presence in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man," Meridians 12:1 (2014): 126.

conscious connections with history."[234] In *Invisible Man*, these ancestral characters—the protagonist's grandfather, the old slave woman in the prologue, Miss Susie Gresham from the college, and even, to some extent, the vet he meets at the Golden Day—link the protagonist not just to older forms of knowledge but to the strategies of resistance and absence that inhere in fugitivity. The protagonist cannot name or locate the force which he feels stabilizing him within Mary's home because his alignment with dominion makes her fugitive practice illegible to him, just as it did with the fugitive communication of the vet earlier in the novel. However, he recognizes the outcome of her home-making: a space of refuge and freedom within an oppressive geography, both familiar and uncomfortable for the novel's protagonist.[235]

The novel also aligns Mary with fugitivity by describing her connections to informal social networks. Upon first meeting Mary, she introduces herself and says, "*everybody know me round this part of Harlem*."[236] The neighborhood resident she solicits to help with the protagonist says he knows her through his mother and calls her "Miss Mary," signaling his respect for her position within the community. In response to his mother's name, Mary launches into a recitation of his family tree: "*Jenny Jackson,*

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[234] Ibid., 127.

[235] The protagonist's description of Mary as a "stable, familiar force" resonates with his earlier description of Miss Susie Gresham as a "bearer of something warm and vital and all-enduring" (114). In both cases, however, the force itself remains unnamed. Miss Susie is perhaps even more attached to the idea of a fugitive home than Mary, as the text tells us she was a former slave and that what she gave the students was something "of which in that island of shame we were not ashamed" (114). The island of shame here refers to the campus, and Miss Susie's ability to provide the students with something not subject to the shame-inducing ideologies of the space resonates with the production of fugitive homes within geographies of dominion.

[236] Ellison, *Invisible Man,* 252; italics in the original

why, I should say you do know me and I know you, you Ralston, and your mama got two more children, boy named Flint and gal named Laura-jean, I should say I know you."[237] This scene marks Mary as both an important figure within the community networks and also as the keeper of social knowledge, particularly of kinship networks. Through this knowledge, she links herself to Ralston and performs for the protagonist her connection to the social space of Harlem.

However, her knowledge of the social networks does not translate into a position of dominance for Mary. Despite the fact that the protagonist refers to her care-taking behavior as "bossing," Mary does not wish to control the protagonist through force or coercion. Rather, she demands he accept her care-taking but does not expect anything in exchange, even his respect. She says to him point blank that she "*don't care what you think about me*"[238] but that she wants to do something for him "*like I hope you'd do something for ole Mary in case she needed it*."[239] Mary sees herself as part of a community, a social world in which favors are given and received freely not for the sake of enlarging an ego or attaining control over others, but with the understanding that persons within the network might exchange positions of relative advantage and should therefore treat others as they would like to be treated when the tables are turned. Later, when the protagonist says he wanted to hide his sickness so that he would not be "trouble to anyone," Mary responds, "Everybody has to be trouble to *some*body."[240] While the

[237] Ibid.; italics in the original
[238] Ibid.; italics in the original
[239] Ibid.; italics in the original
[240] Ibid., 254; italics in the original

protagonist still maintains a faith in the idea of self-sufficiency or self-mastery, Mary recognizes this idea as a fiction and encourages him to understand himself as connected to a social world that will not resent nor take advantage of his position of need. This emphasis on social connections and a shared world of vulnerability over social mastery, both of oneself and others, aligns Mary with the ideologies of fugitivity.

Additionally, the novel connects Mary to fugitive practices by noting her ability to be simultaneously in and absent from oppressive spaces.[241] During her first conversation with the protagonist, she suggests that leaders of any black movement would necessarily need to come from the south rather than the north because they "knows the fire and ain't forgot how it burns,"[242] unlike those who have moved north and accepted their relatively better social position. She then tells the protagonist to watch out for himself and do as she does, saying, "I'm in New York, but New York ain't in me, understand what I mean?"[243] Although Mary might be geographically located in New York, she suggests to the protagonist that its logics or culture have not permeated her being. This differentiation—between one's physical presence in the geography one inhabits and one's refusal of the logics of that geography—is one of the hallmarks of the fugitive home. This statement comes directly after Mary's suggestion that the protagonist

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[241] Other factors of Mary's character align her with the fugitive as well, although they are not discussed at length here due to the space and scope of this chapter. For example, where the protagonist yells at his loud neighbors to "act civilized," Mary yells that they should "act according to what they know" about the building superintendent and why there isn't any heat. Here we can see Mary suggesting that social knowledge can address a problem just as easily as an emphasis on civilization—that one need not know a set of arbitrary rules to act in a way that engenders a system of mutual respect.
[242] Ellison, *Invisible Man,* 255
[243] Ibid.

ought to consider himself a potential leader in the fight against white supremacy, which Mary concludes by saying "it's you young ones what has to remember and take the lead."[244] Throughout this conversation, Mary frames resistance as being related to the memory of something older than one's transplanted life in New York. By locating these references to the importance of the southern black experience near the evocation of geographic identity, Mary's character connects ancestral ways of knowing with the ability to resist the dominant logics of New York with their compelling promise of ascension without conflict.

The protagonist's respect for Mary's ability to be "in" the geography of the city without losing herself to it reflects his positive recognition of the effects of Mary's fugitive home practices. Angered by Brother Jack's reduction of the old evicted couple to the "dead-in-living,"[245] and "incapable of rising to the necessity of the historical situation,"[246] the protagonist finds himself angered by the controlling worldview of the Brotherhood which erases any humanity or individual value from the old couple, simply because their lives do not fit into the Brotherhood's sociological, progress-focused ideology. When he leaves this meeting, he is comforted by thoughts of Mary and how she might disrupt Brother Jack's perception of black life in Harlem: "She was far from dead, or of being ground to bits by New York. Hell, she knew very well how to live here, much better than I with my college training…And I was the one being ground up, not Mary…I

[244] Ibid.
[245] Ibid., 290.
[246] Ibid., 291.

couldn't imagine Mary being as helpless as the old woman at the eviction."[247] The narrator articulates a deep respect for Mary's ability to live in New York without being "ground up"—without losing herself to the dominations of its geography, as the old woman at the eviction had[248]. Importantly, the protagonist does not understand how Mary accomplishes this task—he only knows that she knows how to live here and that he, despite his education, does not.

This inability of the protagonist to see the connection between Mary's sustainable presence in the city and her fugitive character informs the inability of many scholarly readers to recognize Mary's complicated power prior to the publication of "Out of the Hospital and Under the Bar." The novel tells the reader how the protagonist/narrator feels about Mary and certain thoughts he has about her, but Ellison relies on his audience to decide what aspects of the protagonist's judgement reflect his naiveté and which aspects should be trusted. This is to say, the reader has to parse which parts of the novel reflect the consciousness of the narrator, telling this story from the underground, and which parts of the novel reflect the consciousness and naiveté of the protagonist as he experiences these events. Predictably, the protagonist/narrator views Mary through multiple lenses over the course of the novel, which produces a primary ambivalence about the character

[247] Ibid., 295.

[248] While the old woman certainly stays true to her spiritual beliefs during the eviction and we are not told she becomes someone else or begins to act differently, the careful delineation of the possessions that have been thrown into the street works to connect these objects to the very selfhood of those being evicted. Indeed, the collection of objects that compose a home are often understood in the literature on home to be an extension of the self—a public presentation of a private life. In the moment that a home is "dispossessed," then, we can also see a couple losing themselves due to the violences of economic power in the city.

within the text. While this strategy allows Ellison to avoid making direct claims about the subversive possibility of the strategies for black freedom she asserts, it also necessarily provides the opportunity for readers to misunderstand the nuanced presentation of a character like Mary.

Indeed, the novel emphasizes the protagonist's inability to read or understand Mary, despite the scholarly perception of the character as an easily dismissed stereotype. For example, upon returning back to Mary's after his meeting with Brother Jack, the smell of cooking cabbage causes him to realize that perhaps Mary has been having financial trouble of which he had been unaware. He thinks to himself, "What were Mary's problems anyway; who 'articulated her grievances'…? She had kept me going for months, yet I had no idea."[249] He recognizes that though he has lived in her house and though she has sustained him for months, he knows nothing about her problems, her grievances, or her inner life more generally. In response to these guilty thoughts, he feels "an urge to go look at her, perhaps I had really never seen her."[250] Just as the Invisible Man is metaphorically unseen by those he encounters throughout the novel, his own set of cultural or social assumptions prevent him from really seeing the woman who takes care of him. Here, Ellison's language draws an explicit parallel between the forms of invisibility the narrator encounters throughout the text and Mary's invisibility in his own eyes.

[249] Ellison, *Invisible Man,* 297
[250] Ibid.

Melvin Dixon's contribution to the 1980 special issue of *Carleton Miscellany* devoted to *Invisible Man* supports the idea that Mary's stereotypical presentation reflects the protagonist's perception of her, rather than the actual nuance of her written character. He argues that the protagonist's perception of Mary as a "stereotypical matriarch"[251] reflects how his vision has been "marred by the values he has acquired in a pretentious upward mobility."[252] In particular, Dixon notes the "sexism, immaturity, and propensity for racial prejudgment"[253] on the part of the narrator. The values Dixon notes, as well as his association of these values with upward mobility, suggests how the protagonist's early desire for dominion colors his perception of Mary and, via the novel's mode of narration, the reader's perception as well.[254] As with the vet, who recognizes that indoctrination to the ideologies of the campus impacts the protagonist's access to fugitive epistemology, here Dixon argues that the protagonist's ideological alignments make him blind to Mary's humanity and sagacity.

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[251] Melvin Dixon, "O, Mary Rambo, Don't You Weep," *Carleton Miscellany* 78 (Winter 1980): 100.
[252] Ibid.
[253] Ibid.
[254] Similar arguments have been made about the other women in the text, as well as the other stereotypical or folk characters like Jim Trueblood and Leroy with the blueprints. Each of these characters arrives to the reader colored by the lens of the protagonist's beliefs about racial uplift, white supremacy, and the best path to the good life for black Americans. As I will argue more broadly later, one of Ellison's narrative strategies seems to be a masking of fugitive practice even within the novel through the strategic deployment of stereotype. See Johns, "Jim Trueblood and His Critic Readers"; Isiah Lavender, III, "Invisible Women in *Invisible Man*," *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes, and Reviews* 27:3 (2014): 146-151; Myka Tucker Abramson, "Blueprints: *Invisible Man* and the Housing Act of 1949," *American Studies* 54:3 (2015): 9-21.

However, the reader receives little direct information about Mary's internal relationship to the stereotype which attaches to her because the novel only presents the world through the eyes of the protagonist. Rather than seeing this as an inability on Ellison's part to produce female characters with full inner lives, I argue that this is a moment in the novel that evinces Ellison's invocation of fugitive strategies to protect those characters who serve as instruments of the protagonist's development into an agent with a radical recognition of the structural or social limitations to his freedom. For example, Mary advocates that the protagonist become a "race leader," and her language here resonates with racial uplift movements and the strategies for black freedom which invested in respectability politics. However, as discussed earlier, her conversation with the protagonist about this points to her potential awareness of the geographical location of a new radical movement that was, in Ellison's historical reality, actively growing at the time. Her emphasis on southern leadership in the "fight" to "make the changes" gestures toward the persistent presence of radical movements among black women in the South which were, in the 1940s and 1950s, laying the groundwork for what would become the Civil Rights Movement.[255] However, Ellison intentionally masks Mary within a safe, non-threatening stereotype in order to also mask her perhaps more radical hopes for the protagonist. If Mary can be read as a Mammy figure still invested in racial uplift

[255] See Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1999) for a discussion of feminism's roots in Southern blues culture. See Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Knopf, 2010) for a re-periodization of the Civil Rights Movement which emphasizes the importance of women's anti-violence movements its creation, strength, and survival.

ideologies, she is less likely to be read as a character suggesting the protagonist join a growing radical movement for black rights by those readers who might be threatened by such radicalism.

Ellison's complicated invocation of the stereotype reveals itself particularly through the protagonist's discovery of a racist bank in his room at Mary's. After going to the Brotherhood's party, the protagonist awakes to the sound of another tenant of his building banging on the radiator because there is no heat in the building. Looking for something heavy with which to bang back, the protagonist sees that his room contains a piece of racist Americana that he had never before noticed: "the cast-iron figure of a very black, red-lipped and wide-mouthed Negro…It was a bank…the kind of bank which, if a coin is placed in the hand and a lever pressed upon he back, will raise its arm and flip the coin into the grinning mouth."[256] He grabs the bank, "enraged by the tolerance or lack of discrimination, or whatever, that allowed Mary to keep such a self-mocking image around."[257]

The phrasing here bears close-reading. The protagonist finds himself angry at "the tolerance or lack of discrimination," which I argue can be read two ways. In one reading, the protagonist uses "lack of discrimination" to describe Mary's personal lack of taste or discernment, indicating that Mary's placement of this object in his room betrays her bad judgement, or her ignorance of how the bank represents and perpetuates racial oppression. Her "tolerance" for the offensive object, in this reading, reflects her

[256] Ellison, *Invisible Man,* 319.
[257] Ibid.

disinterest in fighting the structures of racism, and this passivity on Mary's part angers the protagonist. However, Ellison leaves the phrasing ambiguous here, never directly stating that it is Mary's tolerance or lack of discrimination that angers the protagonist. This opens the possibility of reading this phrase as reflective of the world Mary inhabits—a world somehow more tolerant or filled with less discrimination than his own. Mary's house can contain this object, despite the racism it represents, because Mary's house exists within but beyond the logics that give such an object its power. In a fugitive home, the meaning of such an object changes. What angers the protagonist in this reading, then, is not the object itself nor Mary's ignorance, but the fact that she can bear the possession of this "self-mocking" object—without shame, without losing herself in its oppressive image—whereas he cannot.[258]

In fact, when the protagonist picks up the bank, Ellison writes in a two-sentence paragraph, "In my hand its expression seemed more of a strangulation than a grin. It was choking, filled to the throat with coins."[259] Here, Ellison indicates that the meaning of the object changes depending on whose hand holds it. In the hand of the protagonist, the stereotype strangles while the figure chokes on coins. This scene comes immediately after he has accepted a job with the Brotherhood, ostensibly in order to pay Mary, despite the fact that he has already sensed that the Brotherhood views him as a tool for black mobilization and indoctrination into their ideology, rather than as an individual. When he

[258] This reading is strengthened by the fact that he adds, "or whatever" after the phrase I mention. Once again, he is not sure what Mary is doing because he does not have access to her fugitive epistemology, but he senses and reacts to the world she creates, often ambivalently.
[259] Ellison, *Invisible Man,* 319.

picks up the bank, it reflects back to him a caricature of how the Brotherhood sees him: a use-object whose usefulness stems in part from its simplified reflection of blackness.[260] The bank's choking countenance parallels how the material comfort of the Brotherhood has lured the protagonist away from Mary's home—how he has become an object for the sake of monetary gain and the promise of power and importance. He cannot bear the presence of the racist object because he continues to understand himself according to the same logics that lend the stereotype its power. The object, in his view, indicts his alignment with oppressive ideologies. Mary, on the other hand, seems to suffer no such oppression.[261]

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[260] Certain parallels between the Brotherhood and the Communist Party in the U.S. (CPUSA) can be read in the novel, which informed a bit of the ire *Invisible Man* received from critics like Irving Howe whose politics invested them in communism and its attendant literary style of social realism. Critical conversations about how to read the Brotherhood in light of Ellison's involvement with the CPUSA—parody? critique?—began almost immediately upon the book's publication. More recently, Danielle Allen has suggested that the novel's emphasis on individuals within the structure of the Brotherhood rather than on describing the Brotherhood as a coherent system indicates that Ellison did not wish to critique the CPUSA so much as to discuss the role of individualism within a democratic system. For more on this and on the scholarship relevant to Ellison's critique of communism, see Danielle Allen, "Ralph Ellison on the Tragicomedy of Citizenship," in *Ralph Ellison and the Raft of Hope: A Political Companion to* Invisible Man, Lucas E. Morel, ed. (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2004).

[261] The attachment of the stereotype to the protagonist is similarly figured as he tries to get rid of it while he walks down the street. When he puts it in a stranger's trash can, she yells at him about his southernness and refuses to share her trash can with him. When he tries just dropping it on the street, someone runs up to him and gives it to him, angered that he won't admit it was his. In each case, his relationship to the rest of the black community is impacted by his desire to shed himself of this stereotype, which can be read as a metaphor for the process of distancing himself from blackness as a member of the brotherhood. He cannot shed the stereotype no matter how he tries—but neither does he want to bear possessing it.

This ambiguous use of a racist object is a means through which Ellison suggests a more complicated reading of Mary than most critical response to the novel allows. Just as the bank changes meaning depending on its context and whose hand holds it, so does the protagonist/narrator's depiction of Mary change depending on context. At times, he sees her as a source of comfort and support—a strong character whose home provides him with material and psychic support during a period of ideological transition. At other times, however, he presents her as a simple and backwards nag who fails to recognize his individuality and contributes to his invisibility as much as any other character. This equivocation demands attention because if Mary attaches to fugitivity in the novel, as I have argued she does, then the narrator's shifting view of her reveals his vacillation between desires for fugitivity and dominion and can shed light on how scholars might read his eventual underground home within the theoretical framework described in the previous chapter.

Although Mary does not exact economic payment from the protagonist, he speaks often of the "silent pressure"[262] he feels when listening to Mary speak about "leadership and responsibility."[263] As mentioned above, Mary's worldview reveals her recognition of social networks predicated on a shared sense of vulnerability and potential need. Rather than demand monetary payment from the protagonist, then, Mary emphasizes that he must use this time in her care to prepare for when he can eventually "git to be

[262] Ellison, *Invisible Man,* 259.
[263] Ibid., 258.

somebody."[264] The protagonist recognizes that Mary does not view his "debt" of responsibility as one which she personally is owed, but rather she simply "remind[s] him constantly that something was expected of [him]"[265] by a subject erased through the passive construction of the sentence.[266] The rest of Mary's dialogue and the protagonist's perception of her desires for him indicate that the subject that would fill in this blank is a racial community—the black social world to which Mary wants him to understand that he belongs and which will be responsible for him as he ought to be responsible to it. He later says, "I was torn between resenting her for [the reminder] and loving her for the nebulous hope she kept alive."[267] A mutual responsibility shared between the protagonist and the black social world to which Mary connects him serves as a source of hope for him, but he also resents that he must be responsible to it.

The protagonist's ambivalence about Mary reflects the novel's larger ambivalence or tension between individual identity and the wider social world. Home, as I theorize it in this dissertation, mediates this relationship through the production and protection of a threshold between self and society, and also reproduces the social world that makes possible certain kinds of individuals. In the sociality attached to the fugitive home, individuals exist in loose collectivity, bound through a sense of responsibility to one

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[264] Ibid.
[265] Ibid.
[266] Here, Mary's conception of debt resonates with Moten and Harney's theorization of debt in *The Undercommons*. They refer to debt as "social," arguing that the "fugitive public" is a place of "bad debt," meaning debt that will never be repaid. In other words, they imagine the fugitive public as a space in which everyone owes everyone else, and no one holds the unidirectional position of creditor, creating a space of freedom and mutual obligation. I see Mary's home functioning in a similar way within *Invisible Man*.
[267] Ellison, *Invisible Man,* 258.

another and a recognition of the instrumentality of the community to one's individual survival. In the sociality attached to dominion, individuals exist on a hierarchy and those at the top of the hierarchy feel a sense of responsibility to those within their spheres of power, but only in so much as it confirms their power and not in a way that recognizes the individuality of those whom they control. As the protagonist equivocates between his investment in Mary's home and his investment in the home he finds in the Brotherhood, Ellison reveals the central character's struggle over the possibilities for individuality within each of these opposing forms of home. After deciding to join the Brotherhood but before he leaves Mary's house, the narrator describes this struggle: "I might as well admit right now, I thought, that there are many things about people like Mary that I dislike. For one thing, they seldom know where their personalities end and yours begins; they usually think in terms of 'we' while I have always tended to think in terms of 'me'…Brother Jack and the others talked in terms of 'we,' but it was a different, bigger 'we.'"[268] His struggle to think through which 'we' provides more space for the 'me' he wishes to cultivate illustrates a central tension of the novel: how can individuality and social engagement be brought into balance?

Although the novel never resolves this tension, the protagonist's renewed desire to return to Mary's following his fall-out with the Brotherhood and his run-in with Ras the Exhorter eventually leads him into the underground home where he comes to know himself. He comes to an awareness of this desire for her fugitive home suddenly, as he tries to escape Ras and his gang: "So I ran expecting death between the shoulder blades

[268] Ibid., 316.

or through the back of my head, and as I ran I was trying to get to Mary's."[269] The narrator tells us that his turn toward Mary was "not a decision of thought but something I realized suddenly while running,"[270] a choice stemming from an alternative epistemology than the rational or scientific one the protagonist had relied on for most of the novel. Later, having fallen into a manhole and becoming trapped underground, he thinks again of Mary: "In the morning I'll remove the lid…Mary, I should have gone to Mary's. I would go now to Mary's in the only way that I could,"[271] which the novel suggests is by falling asleep. In this moment, "Mary's" ceases to be a solely a place and instead becomes a state of being, one which the narrator can "go to" in sleep in he cannot get there physically. By seeking a return to Mary, the protagonist motivates the action that will eventually lead to his recognition of himself as an individual, circumscribed by a restrictive social world, but not without agency.

However, after a line break, the novel tells us that the protagonist/narrator was "never to reach Mary's," and the narrative section of the novel ends with his recognition that "I couldn't return to Mary's or to any part of my old life…I had been as invisible to Mary as I had been to the Brotherhood. No, I couldn't return to Mary's, or to the campus, or to the Brotherhood, or home. I could only move ahead or stay here, underground. So I

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[269] Ibid., 560.
[270] Ibid.; It is worth noting as well that his desire for Mary's fugitive home springs up as he himself becomes a runaway from Ras' dominion over Harlem. He is himself a fugitive of sorts in this moment, but he lacks the stability of the fugitive *home* he had at Mary's. More theoretical work is needed on the relationship between escape, mobility, and fugitivity than can be borne out by this footnote, but this moment suggests that perhaps it is not the fleeing that makes one fugitive so much as the being-gone.
[271] Ibid., 567.

would try to stay here until I was chased out."[272] Mary's home, then, does not figure individual freedom for the protagonist, as he felt invisible there as much as he did within the dominion of the Brotherhood. However, the protagonist's desire to return to Mary draws him toward the underground, attaching his desire for Mary's fugitive home to his eventual inhabitation of the underground. Like with the vet, the protagonist/narrator is attracted to the freedom found in the fugitive homes of the novel, but cannot fully accept the terms under which that freedom is offered. While the vet trades physical immobility for a freedom of thought and speech, Mary's social world does not extend beyond the black geography of Harlem. Torn between the limitations of both fugitivity and dominion, and perceiving an inability in each kind of home to produce individual selfhood, the narrator makes a decision to "hibernate" below ground until the proper time to emerge presents itself.

ELLISON'S UNDERGROUND

For Ellison, the underground home in the novel does not figure a fugitive home, so much as it figures a fugitive space disconnected from a larger social world in which an individual might come to know him or herself. However, neither does this space reject the practice of the fugitive home. Its invisibility, its theft of "power," and its usefulness as a space of self-cultivation all tie it to the fugitive home as I theorize it in this dissertation. Its alienation, however, differentiates it from the fugitive homes seen in plantation slavery. Where the ideal form of the fugitive home maintains the connection between individuals and a broader social world, the protagonist's underground home separates

[272] Ibid.

him from all forms of sociality, both white and black. He comes to understand much about himself, but he is not yet able to hold on to that sense of self while engaging with a larger social world.

Baker draws a parallel between Ellison's approach to the novel and the narrator's "hibernation," suggesting that Ellison hid out during a hot political moment in order to be more "likable" and less threatening. Ellison's text, however, is not an alienated thing—rather, both the text and Ellison himself circulated throughout the world of literature and culture for the remainder of the 20th century. Unlike the narrator or his underground home, Ellison's novel serves to connect readers to broader social worlds, although perhaps not using the most obvious methods. Indeed, both of the characters I discussed at length in this chapter are "hidden" within the text, allowing them to be dismissed by certain kinds of readers, even as they communicate subversive knowledge to others. In this way, Ellison's novel resembles a fugitive home itself, providing space for the subtle subversions of the vet and Mary to exist while also hiding them in plain sight.

For his part, Baker sees extensive promise in Ellison's characters, including Mary Rambo. He writes that a set of "potentially activist and engaged Fanonian native intellectuals…offer potential for effective black leadership"[273] in the novel, and he includes Mary Rambo among their number. While he agrees that these characters are often too readily dismissed in scholarship, he suggests the reason for this dismissal is that "Ellison's fear of McCarthyism—and an obsessive phobia of not being liked—kept him

[273] Baker, *Critical Memory*, 32.

from fleshing [them] out."[274] In other words, it is not a failing of scholarship but a failure of the author that limits the radical possibilities of the characters. However, if *Invisible Man* is itself a fugitive home for subversive blackness, perhaps Ellison intended to keep these characters "cartoonlike"[275] in order to communicate more subtly with a variety of audiences. Rather than failing to confront those individuals and social structures that sought dominion at mid-century, then, the novel chose to exist among and within in them, subtly communicating secret knowledge. Dismissing the vet as insane and Mary as a Mammy, readers that would be threatened by their emphasis on fugitive paths to freedom could ignore their potential.

However, the novel's ambivalence about these characters and the concluding alienation that stems from the protagonist's desire to return to Mary's must also be taken into account. Although *Invisible Man*'s underground room, as well as the vet's recognition of the criminality inherent to freedom, resonate with the ideas about fugitivity and freedom presented in *The Undercommons*, the sacrifices one must make in order to attain that freedom seem much larger in the novel than they do in the later theoretical text. I see this as a reflection of Ellison's historical positioning prior to the Civil Rights Movement, and his more personal and less historiographical connections with the lived experiences of the enslaved. As will become apparent in later chapters, artists and scholars working post-Civil Rights have been able to return to the structures of life that grow out of plantation slavery to find liberation in them. Ellison, however, still invests in

[274] Ibid.
[275] Ibid.

the promise of black integration into the national democratic community as the path to black liberation. The novel's ambivalence about the promise and limitations of fugitive homes reflect the author's desire to "affirm while resisting"[276]—to suggest ancestral ways to resist power while also affirming the promise of racially-equal democracy made by the U.S. Neither wholly willing to seek the path to the master's house, nor wholly willing to escape as a fugitive into its hinterlands, Ellison's novel holds the two in tension, waiting for a moment when perhaps one or the other might seem like the best choice.

[276] Ralph Ellison, qtd in Timothy Parrish, *Ralph Ellison and the Genius of America* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012).

Chapter Three —Fugitive Domestic: Toni Morrison's Pedagogy for Freedom

Toni Morrison came into prominence during the rise of black feminism in the 1970s and 1980s. Her critical acclaim grew throughout the 1980s, earning her the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the American Book Award in 1988 for *Beloved* (1987), and culminated in her winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. Her historical location, as well as her scholarly and journalistic contributions to debates about the role of black women in "women's liberation," place her in conversation with the womanist tradition of Alice Walker and the black feminism of Angela Davis, bell hooks, and Audre Lorde. However, Morrison's fiction defies easy categorization as her central preoccupation seems to be a thickly-descriptive conjuring of "the elaborately socialized world of black people."[277] Each of her 11 novels explores multiple facets of black and white experience in the diaspora, allowing multiple voices and subject positions to exist, speak, and be heard simultaneously and, remarkably, without consistently privileging any one particular viewpoint. Morrison's fiction evinces a deep empathy for nearly every character, revealing how structures of oppression disfigure and deform even those who ostensibly possess power within a given system. Like Ellison's *Invisible Man*, discussed in the previous chapter, her novels describe how faith in oppressive social structures hinders the ability of subjects to grow into selfhood and freedom.

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[277] Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (1977; repr., New York: Penguin, 1987), 149. Citations are to the Penguin edition.

However, Morrison's fiction also maps paths to thriving and liberation more explicitly than does *Invisible Man*. Through her invocation of the analytical ground Katherine McKittrick describes as "plot-in-plantation,"[278] Morrison's fiction locates within the violent histories and systems that subjugate black individual and cultural life "a knowledge system, *produced outside the realms of normalcy, thus rejecting the very rules of the system*."[279] In other words, rather than offering a narrative in opposition to dominant social structures that reifies the totality of white supremacist, capitalist, or patriarchal ideologies, Morrison asserts the extant humanity already running rouge within these old and powerful systems. By providing examples of historically-grounded fugitivity in the marginal or peripheral worlds that so often get emptied of presence or meaning, Morrison describes forms of freedom that have always been possible and remain possible, and these forms of freedom more often than not demand the selective taking-up of useful ideological, intellectual, and spiritual objects from both dominant and resistant ways of life.

This chapter focuses on how Morrison uses descriptions of home to map a path to thriving in her fiction. While every novel in her canon offers some insight in support of my argument, I have chosen to focus on three of her novels: *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Beloved* (1987), and *Home* (2012). Each of these novels draws on the history and practice of fugitive homes in the 19th century, as well as the corollary engagement of oppressed persons in aspirational dominion, to describe and imagine the forms and limitations of

[278] McKittrick, "Plantation Futures" *small axe*, 11.
[279] Ibid., author's emphasis.

black freedom in the 20th century. The same ghosts that animate Afro-pessimist scholarship—the inescapability of violent history, perpetual racial antagonism, and the residue of impossible choice—haunt these novels, but Morrison's fiction remains more ambivalent about their inescapability or impact. Primarily, I assert that Morrison's writing has always focused on practical, livable politics that would allow for survival, thriving, or fully-fledged freedom depending on a person's access to social, economic, or spiritual resources. Morrison's oeuvre as a whole, and particularly the three novels I look at here, indicates a writerly project of human affirmation if not optimism—[280]locating a set of tools that draw on wily practices of black life in various eras of oppression and liberation to articulate a means of living through or living beyond whatever violent, frightening, or precarious past or present might attempt to delimit the possibility of life. Morrison's concern, beyond literary prose and high-level historical and ideological engagement, seems to be a pedagogy of life, an instruction on how to not only survive but thrive, developed over many years through many novels, all of which locate a root in the oppressive past but find *possibility* there, rather than either despair or promise. Through her engagements with home-spaces, Morrison maps the tools that have always existed in black life-ways in the Americas in order to point her readers toward the ways that they

[280] My use of the term optimism here intends to position these novels as disruptive to the totality of Afro-pessimism. Morrison's optimism reflects the "black optimism" described by Fred Moten in "The Case of Blackenss" and "Black Optimism/Black Operation," and which also appears in Jared Sexton's "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism." At its most basic, this formulation of optimism suggests that the disavowals and appositionally that produce and inhere in blackness also provide the possibility of its escape from power. In other words, the subversive potential of blackness stems from the same conditions that produce the oppression of black persons.

might make themselves free, without declaring that path to be easy, readily apparent, or universal.

Song of Solomon and Fugitive Antagonism

Much of the scholarship on *Song of Solomon*—particularly the early readings of the novel in the 1980s and 1990s—centers on the novel's male characters. Morrison herself has said that this book is "about men,"[281] and Rolland Murray locates the text as a response to the Moynihan report's indictment of black manhood. However, the focus on the masculine aspects of the novel belies the importance of the character of Pilate to its narrative. The male characters in the novel all invest in one or more of the ideologies that structured the patriarchal dominion of the slave master.[282] The trope of patriarchy appears, of course, but additionally, many of the male characters justify their role in the

[281] Judy Pocock, "'Through a Glass Darkly: Typology in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 35:3 (2005): 294.

[282] For example, the character of Guitar evinces thought patterns informed (and limited) by the plantation's economic logic. Valérie Loichot in her book *Orphan Narratives: The Postplantation Literature of Faulkner, Glissant, Morrison, and Saint-John Perse* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2007) argues that Guitar invests in what she calls the "thinking of the Ledger,"□ evoking the slave owner's tool of objectification to describe Guitar's sense of social justice through score-keeping. Rather than working against the logic that made/makes black people fungible to begin with, Guitar instead mobilizes that same logic to make white people fungible as well. Guitar's sense of control and power in the world still derives from his investment and use of an economic logic descended from the social violence of the slave owner. Further, Dr. Foster, Ruth's father, lives in a house sits away from the rest of the black homes in town in a white neighborhood, and from that privileged position, he cares for, profits from, and holds in contempt the black people living in the segregated Southside. Although he concerns himself deeply with the skin color of his grandchildren and calls black people "cannibals,"□ evincing his allegiance with the racial logic of white supremacy, his economic success relies on the black townspeople who have no other options for medical care due to the strictures of Northern segregation. His social and financial position relies on the disenfranchisement of black people, aligning him as well with the economic logic of dominion.

black community using the economic or social logics—what Katherine McKittrick calls "plantation logic"[283]—that rationalized the oppressive power of the slave master and informed his sense of home. However, by locating these characters in particular historical moments and clearly delineating the sources of their sense of precarity, Morrison makes clear that this "desire to erect patriarchal dominion"[284] using the techniques of the master results from the threat of violence and disenfranchisement against black people even as it enables and profits from that same violence and disenfranchisement. With a deep empathy and care for black men, Morrison offers that the desire for patriarchal dominion is a response to the systemic emasculation, disenfranchisement, and dispossession they have experienced since slavery. However, her novel still asserts that each form of patriarchal dominion has failed as a strategy for black freedom, both individual and collective. Through the character of Pilate, however, Morrison offers a map to another form of liberation.

Song of Solomon produces its central tension through the struggle between Macon and his sister Pilate, a character marked as being in almost every way antithetical to the

[283] McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," 3. McKittrick uses the term "plantation logic" to describe how the historical space of the plantation—a site of anti-black violence and dispossession—continues to inform contemporary spatial and cultural structures (e.g. cities, prisons) into the present day. She writes that across colonial/post-colonial spaces "a plantation logic characteristic of (but not identical to) slavery emerges in the present both ideologically and materially." Her work here grows out of larger discussions about the relationship between the slave economy and modernity, and about the stickiness of plantation socialities. See n10 in her essay for a list of relevant literature.

[284] Rolland Murray, "The Long Strut: *Song of Solomon* and the Emancipatory Limits of Black Patriarchy," *Callaloo* 22:1 (Winter 1999): 125.

character of Macon, for influence over Macon's son Milkman.[285] Macon is a black man who, the novel tells us, remains invested in the interlocking ideologies—primarily white supremacy,[286] patriarchy, and property—that structured dominion on the plantation and continue to structure dominion into the present day. Macon is an "oppressive patriarchal presence"[287] in the Dead home, an "overwhelming patriarchal authority"[288] who "kept each member of his family awkward with fear."[289] The novel describes Macon's constant disappointment with the home-making abilities of his wife and daughters, and his inability to speak to his son Milkman without barking a command or criticism at him. Further, Macon's sense of power—and tragically, his understanding of freedom—also grows out of a faith in ownership to protect his selfhood, both in the sense of his physical body and in the sense of his psyche. Macon's obsession with ownership functions to alienate him from the black community of Southside and also from his own family. Macon feels comfortable and secure when in possession of his "ring of keys,"[290] rather than through the bonds of affection or kinship that might otherwise affirm a sense of

[285] Although I do not go into it here, the battle over Milkman reflects the nature of home as a space of social reproduction. Born into Macon's home, the seduction of Pilate's intimate sphere draws Milkman toward a different social world that that into which his father hopes to raise him. See the introduction to this dissertation.
[286] For example, Loichot argues that Macon's fetishization of Ruth's white underwear serves as a compensation for the sense of "amputation" of whiteness that Fanon locates in the black psyche. His obsession with the "whitest," "snowy," underwear that Ruth wore stands in contrast to her skin like "unbleached sugar." (16) Loichot states that the "underwear's fabric gains the properties of human skin, *is* human skin," (170) allowing Macon to attach the whiteness he values to his non-white wife.
[287] Jennifer Terry, "Buried Perspectives: Narratives of Landscape in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon,*" *Narrative Inquiry* 17:1 (2007): 100.
[288] Murray, "The Long Strut," 128.
[289] Morrison, *Song of Solomon,* 10.
[290] Morrison, *Song of Solomon,* 17.

belonging.[291] In an overt endorsement of the capitalist faith in ownership, Macon tells his son Milkman just before his odyssey through the South that he should not travel but should rather invest in his father's business and landholdings. He tells Milkman, "You'll own it all. All of it. You'll be free. Money is freedom, Macon. The only real freedom there is."[292] Here, Macon explicitly links wealth and freedom, evincing his unquestioning belief that the path to freedom lies in ownership.

Where Macon invests in the ideologies of dominion, which have girded the homes of those who seek to power and control since the concurrent development of capitalism and racialized slavery in the U.S., Pilate, on the other hand, explicitly seeks a way of being and sense of self that eschews such ideologies. In the character of Pilate and through descriptions of her home, Morrison draws on historically-grounded fugitivity in order to offer a map to freedom that is alternative to the controlling, policing, and power-seeking path Macon advocates. Pilate does not fill the juridical category of fugitive,[293] but rather calls to mind the fugitive as I theorize it in this dissertation. Existing both within the segregated geography of Southside and somehow beyond the logics that structure its class, gender, and race oppressions, Pilate figures the fugitive slave who would slip in and out of the plantation geography, within its physical space but beyond its control,

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[291] Terry's essay argues that Macon's obsession with property accumulation "illustrates familial and communal dislocation" and "is clearly formative in his estranged relation to others" (100).

[292] Morrison, *Song of Solomon,* 163.

[293] One might be able to argue that because Pilate witnessed the murder of the transient at the hands of her brother, she does exist on the wrong side of the law, but the text never tells us that anyone much cared about that murder, nor that anyone came looking for Macon or Pilate after they had fled.

listed on its ledgers but not fungible property. While Macon's home drips with patriarchal domesticity, indoctrinating his family into its associated ideologies, Pilate's home remains unencumbered by the prescriptive rules that bind up normative domesticity.[294] Serving as antagonist to Macon's home, then, Pilate's home recalls the fugitive homes found on the planation and offers their lifeways as a means of emancipation.

The first description of Pilate's home comes in the first chapter of the novel, as Macon Dead takes a shortcut through Southside on his way home. The text describes the home as a "narrow single-story house whose basement seemed to be rising from rather than settling into the ground."[295] The novels tells us that Pilate has chosen not to have electricity or gas run into the house, opting instead to rely on wood, coal, and candles for heat and cooking. The house also lacks indoor plumbing, and the women rely on a dry sink to pump water into their kitchen. Already, Pilate's home evinces a type of fugitivity characterized by a disconnection from capital as represented by the utility company, a business that commodifies common goods and sells them.[296] In the novel, this description of Pilate's home leads into Macon's memory of her lack of navel, another detail that scholars argue figures Pilate's disconnection from traditional forms of the social like the

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[294] The openness of Pilate's home also calls to mind Moten and Harney's idea of the undercommons as a place that is "open for refuge even though it may let in police agents and destruction." See Moten and Harney, *The Undercommons*: 38.

[295] Morrison, *Song of Solomon,* 27.

[296] Pilate's disconnection here differs significantly from the "theft" that marks the fugitivity of the protagonist in *Invisible Man*. Where Pilate chooses to disconnect from power, the protagonist chooses to steal it. Pilate retains some aspect of the "criminality" inherent in freedom, as Moten and Harney theorize it, as she has witnessed a crime and carries its material residue with her. However, she doesn't seek to amass "power" in the underground as Ellison's protagonist does. I suspect gender is at play in this difference, but due to the scope of this project, I leave such an interrogation to future work.

"blood ties" and "blood lines" that have supported the building of generational wealth through capitalist accumulation.[297] However, despite the disconnection of this place, Macon feels strangely drawn to it, as his sister, her daughter, and her granddaughter are singing inside and he remembers when he and Pilate were children and were close, calling her "his first caring for."[298] The home in this scene, then, lies disconnected from particular forms of the dominant social world, like capitalism and municipality. However, the novel suggests that the community of song emanating from the home is so strong that it draws Macon in, countering a disconnection from the mainstream with the magnetic attraction of the intimate.

The fugitivity of Pilate's home is borne out in Milkman's visit later in the novel as well. As a boy, Milkman's friend Guitar takes him to visit his aunt's home, and Milkman is surprised to find his experience of Pilate a disruption to his idea both about the order of the world and to his imagination of Pilate herself. First, Milkman comments on his aunt's countenance and physical appearance: "And while she looked as poor as everyone said she was, something was missing from her eyes that should have confirmed it. Nor was she dirty; unkempt, yes, but not dirty. The whites of her fingernails were like ivory."[299] In Pilate's body, Milkman finds the physical markers of poverty but a lack of shame or deference that he assumes should accompany them. He also finds her "unkempt" but not dirty—something about her is out of order, but the lack of order

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[297] Dana Medoro, "Justice and Citizenship in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 32:1 (2002): 12.
[298] Morrison, *Song of Solomon,* 28.
[299] Ibid., 38.

doesn't signal "dirty" to Milkman. These contradictions continue when Milkman enters the home's living room, which Morrison describes as "a large sunny room that looked both barren and cluttered."[300] Milkman notes the sparseness of the furniture—the room contains only "a rocking chair, two straight-backed chairs, a large table, [and] a sink and stove."[301] Pilate dumps her orange peel into a crock which "like most everything in the house had been made for some other purpose"[302] and proceeds to cook a soft-boiled egg in "a blue-and-white wash basin which she used for a saucepan."[303] Pilate's home rejects traditional domesticity and the ordering of objects that demands certain things fulfill certain purposes without exception. Rather, Pilate repurposes available objects to her needs at a given moment, and possesses only objects that can fulfill multiple needs. However, the novel does not register this as a lack in Pilate's home, instead describing the space as a way of being that is both acceptable and appealing to Milkman, even as it stands in stark contrast to the boy's own home. Each of the surprising things about Pilate that Milkman marks further link her to the fugitive homes of enslavement. Her "unkempt" but "not dirty" appearance resonates with the "unkempt" or "messy" homes black slaves created in order to hide their importance from white observers.[304] Her lack of deference and shame reveals her disregard for the ideologies that structure Milkman's world, indicating her alignment with some other system of meaning and value. Similarly, her ties to domestic objects emphasize use value over the symbolic value or prescriptive

[300] Ibid., 39.
[301] Ibid.
[302] Ibid.
[303] Ibid.
[304] See "Fugitive Homes" in Chapter One of this dissertation.

function that might regulate the use of such objects in the normative domesticity linked to dominion. The physical space of Pilate's home as well as her own countenance further link her to fugitivity.

In these scenes, as well as throughout the text, the novel intentionally sets up Pilate's home in an antagonistic relationship with the traditional, black bourgeois home of Macon Dead and his family, which underscores the antagonistic relationship between Pilate and Macon as characters. In the first scene described above, Macon begins to imagine his own home as he moves further away from the song coming from Pilate's house, and the description is bleak: "his wife's narrow unyielding back; his daughters, boiled dry from years of yearning; his son, to whom he could speak only if his words held some command or criticism."[305] This stands in stark contrast to the "effortless beauty of the women singing in the candlelight,"[306] emanating from Pilate's house, which reminds Mason of "fields and wild turkey and calico"[307] and which allows him to feel "the irritability of the day drain from him."[308] When Mason chooses to turn back toward Pilate's house to hear more of the singing, the novel punctuates the antagonism between the two spaces by describing Mason's desire for something he cannot get in his own carefully constructed domestic space: "There was no music there, and tonight he wanted just a bit of music."[309]

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[305] Morrison, *Song of Solomon,* 28; Jennifer Terry describes this image of domestic life as one of "sterility, alienation, and disappointment." See Terry, "Buried Perspectives," 100.
[306] Morrison, *Song of Solomon,* 29.
[307] Ibid.
[308] Ibid.
[309] Morrison, *Song of Solomon,* 28.

For Milkman, the feelings of joy he experiences in Pilate's house come from being "surrounded by women who seemed to enjoy him and who laughed out loud,"[310] in contrast to his own mother who Milkman imagines as "too insubstantial, too shadowy for love" and as "a pale but complicated woman given to deviousness and ultra-fine manners."[311] Milkman finds himself "in love" with Hagar, Pilate's granddaughter, and realizes that this moment in Pilate's house is "the first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy."[312] He thinks that it is "no wonder his father was afraid of them,"[313] implying that Pilate's home is dangerous not because it openly opposes the Dead home, but rather because it offers a seductive and fulfilling alternative to the forms of bourgeois domesticity the inhabitants of the Dead home enact. The Dead home is a space of dominion. Where the Dead home is about ownership and control, both of oneself and of ones surroundings, Pilate's home is characterized as uncontrolled, indeterminate, and open.

However, the novel does not frame Pilate as poised in opposition to her brother. Rather, her presence, her home, and her way of being antagonize Macon because they interfere in his ability to enact dominion over all the spaces and bodies he considers himself to own, including those of his wife and son.[314] Pilate is unwilling to submit to

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[310] Ibid., 47.
[311] Ibid., 75.
[312] Ibid., 47.
[313] Ibid.
[314] Both Ruth and Milkman at different points in the novel seek refuge in Pilate's house. Ruth seeks out Pilate to help her get pregnant and to protect the unborn Milkman when Macon is trying to get her to miscarry. Milkman seeks refuge in Pilate's house not so

Macon's control—unwilling even to ascribe to the ideologies that structure Macon's worldview—and because of this, she becomes an antagonist to his bourgeois aspirations. I draw here from Wilderson's use of antagonism to describe the structural relation between whiteness and blackness[315] in Western culture. Wilderson defines antagonism as "an irreconcilable struggle between entities, or positions, the resolution of which is not dialectical but entails the obliteration of one of the positions,"[316] which he marks as inherently different than conflictual relations that could ostensibly lead to some kind of dialectical resolution or synthesis. In the simplest terms, conflictual relations permit the hope of resolution; antagonisms persist hopelessly until one of the opposing parties ceases to exist. However, because Wilderson notes that this antagonism between white and black is ontological and foundational to western culture, such deep antagonisms must be able to persist without the obliteration of either side for a long section of historical time. Moments of violent confrontation between whiteness and blackness arise throughout Western history, but neither side has, as of yet, ceased to exist.

Antagonism then describes a state of being more than a moment of crisis, which makes it a more useful rubric through which to understand the relationship between Pilate and Macon in *Song of Solomon*, and between the fugitivity and dominion each character

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pointedly, but as a place where he can experience the "peace," "energy," and "comfort" (301) derived from her ability to make a warm home that stands in contrast to his own.

[315] I use the terms whiteness and blackness, where Wilderson more often uses "Master/Settler" and "Slave." He attaches these categories to whiteness and blackness, however, so for the congruity of my own writing and argument, I have chosen not to introduce these new terms here. For more information on the categories Wilderson uses, see the introduction of this dissertation and Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*.

[316] Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 5.

figures. These two characters do not come into "conflict" with one another, meaning they do not argue and come to a dialectical resolution. In the only direct confrontation between these two characters in the novel,[317] Macon attempts to shame Pilate for her appearance and her lack of domestic skills, and Pilate refuses to engage. Made uneasy by the fact that Pilate has "cut the last thread of propriety"[318] Macon tells her "not to come again until she could show some respect for herself."[319] Macon yells at her about her dress, which he considers to be unfeminine, and "trembles"[320] at the thought of losing the white capital that supports his business because of his association with a sister, niece, and grandniece who act like "common street women."[321] Pilate responds to Macon's rant by saying, "I been worried sick about you too, Macon." Pilate refuses Macon's fury, opting to read it as concern, and Macon demands that she leave his house in response to this (intentional) misrecognition. Pilate leaves without argument and does not return. This scene reveals that Pilate's very existence produces a sense of precarity in Macon—he fears the loss of his respectability and, along with it, the investments of white capital that sustain his bourgeois position—and his direct confrontation with Pilate about this precarity leads not to the obliteration of Pilate but simply to her disappearance from his home and her return to her own home in Southside.

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[317] The two characters do argue as children, but at that point in their lives, their paths had not yet diverged so significantly.
[318] Morrison, *Song of Solomon,* 20.
[319] Ibid.
[320] Ibid.
[321] Ibid.

Pilate's behavior in this scene is exemplary of the way fugitivity antagonizes dominion without engaging its confrontations. Macon is driven to anger by Pilate's unwillingness to invest in the ideologies that structure his world, particularly when she is within the walls of his home. Pilate is out of place in Macon's home, and his inability to control her dress and comportment, primarily due to her lack of requisite shame and deference to his patriarchal positioning, reminds him of the inescapable precarity of his position. However, this disagreement holds no hope of resolution because the two positions are irreconcilable. Macon invests in patriarchy, ownership, and white supremacy, and Pilate simply does not. Just as the master's sense of home demanded the complicity of the plantation community in order to function, so too does Macon's home, descended from dominion and structured by its logics, demand outward compliance from all bodies within it. Pilate's recalcitrant existence threatens Macon's tenuous hold on the sense of control necessary to his sustain his ease in dominion, particularly when she is present in his home. Pilate responds to his anger by allowing him control of his space without relinquishing control of herself. The antagonism continues, even as Pilate removes herself from Macon's house and returns to Southside, and the novel tells us that Macon remains anxious over her existence there and her potential influence on his son. He cannot destroy her, and so his anxiety persists as long as she exists within—yet somehow beyond—the geography of his domination.

In *Song of Solomon*, through the antagonism between Macon and Pilate, home becomes a stage for the confrontation between the internalized oppressions that plague black patriarchal socialities and the form(s) of black freedom that grow(s) out of an

embrace of fugitivity—a story about how whiteness/white supremacy and investments in patriarchy terrorize the black home, even in the absence of antagonistic white people. While the novel explains that Macon's attachment to property and ownership stems from his deep love for his murdered father, Morrison also emphasizes the anxieties and emptiness associated with his embrace of a set of ideals founded in the violence of slavery. Pilate, on the other hand, deals with this loss and its ensuing isolation by "[throwing] away every assumption she had learned and began at zero."[322] Rather than doubling down on an investment in dominion in order to ward off precarity, she instead seeks to create or learn a mode of being that might allow her to be at peace with contingency. Her existence and ethos, then, stand almost diametrically opposed to that of Macon and the other male characters of the novel: where Macon invests in ordering ideologies, Pilate intentionally divests herself from them; where Macon stands apart from both individual intimate connections and community ties, Pilate makes human relationships of all sorts her first priority. Where Macon enacts dominion, Pilate enacts fugitivity.

This reading of Pilate is borne out by a later scene in the novel, when Pilate goes down to the jail to get Milkman and Guitar released. Milkman and Guitar, spurred on by Macon's tales of gold in Pilate's house, steal the green bag she keeps hanging from her rafters that she calls her "inheritance." On their drive home, they are pulled over and found to be carrying the sack which it turns out is full of human bones. The police learn the bag belongs to Pilate, and she is called down to the station to explain its contents. In

[322] Ibid., 149.

front of Milkman and Guitar, Pilate gives a deferential performance to the police officers which Milkman later calls "her Aunt Jemima act."[323] Milkman recalls that she fully embodied the part, somehow making herself physically shorter and changing her voice to better suit what the police wanted to hear. When he hears the story from Milkman, Macon is "humiliated" by the thought of having to "depend on Pilate to get his son out of jail."[324] He tells Milkman that he should have told the police his name, and that he should be thankful for Macon's wallet, which he sees as the true source of Milkman's freedom.

Simultaneously, Macon is perplexed by his sister's motivations in keeping the bones, which belonged to the white man he murdered in self-defense when they were hiding in a cave as children. He says to Milkman, "Who knows what Pilate knows?…I'll never understand that woman. I'm seventy-two years old and I'm going to die not understanding one thing about her."[325] Here Macon expresses his inability to recognize his sister's worldview. He assumed that the contents of her valued bag would be gold, as that is an object that has value to Macon. However, he finds that she values the bones of the white man they killed, and he cannot fathom the logic that underlies the rationality of that act. Like the fugitive homes in plantation slavery, Pilate's home befuddles Macon because he lacks the grammar that structures her attachments. The space is illegible to Macon as he is blinded by his own attachment to the ideologies of dominion.

However, while Macon finds Pilate's logic confusing, Pilate seems well-versed in the logic of Macon's world, even as she disregards it. Her performance in the police

[323] Ibid., 209.
[324] Ibid., 204.
[325] Ibid., 206.

station is particularly revealing of her fugitive practice within the geographies of power. In order to save herself as well as Milkman and Guitar, she tells the police that the bones in the bag belong to her dead husband, "lynched in Mississippi fifteen years ago,"[326] and that she keeps the bones with her because she could not afford to bury them when he died. She then quotes the bible to them: "Bible say what so e'er the Lord hath brought together, let no man put asunder—Matthew Twenty-one: Two."[327] However, as scholars have noted,[328] the verse she quotes here is not Matthew 21:2. The actual content of that bible verse is, "Go into the village over against you, and straightaway ye shall find an ass tied, and a colt with her: loose them and bring them unto me."[329] Brenda Marshall argues that Pilate's misquote here is intentional and serves to help Pilate retain her dignity even as she enacts the role of the supplicant for the benefit of her nephew and herself. Pilate is making a joke at the expense of Milkman and Guitar—as Marshall states, "Guitar and Milkman are the ass and colt tied, and Pilate is the one who goes to the station to loose them."[330] Marshall contends that this word-play on the part of Pilate allows her to "keep her sense of self"[331] in the midst of her performance of deference.

Pilate here "signifies" on her nephew and friend, as well as on the police officers, a practice in which both the vet and Mary engage to similar ends in *Invisible Man*. In this moment, Pilate's linguistic play evinces one function of fugitivity, which is to provide

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[326] Ibid., 207.
[327] Ibid.
[328] See Pocock, "Typology"; Brenda Marshall, "The Gospel According to Pilate," *American Literature* 57:3 (1985): 486-489.
[329] Qtd. in Marshall, "The Gospel According to Pilate," 488.
[330] Marshall, "The Gospel According to Pilate," 488.
[331] Ibid.

space for not only survival but freedom, play, and enjoyment within a world structured by oppressive ideologies. Pilate's fugitive act of language in the police station asserts her presence—the presence of her interior self—despite her physical disappearance into the deferential embodiment and obsequious behavior required by this contact with power.[332] Similar to the arrangement of the fugitive home that protects it from interference through intentional illegibility, Pilate here produces a physical and linguistic hiding place within which her free self can not only exist but assert itself to her own amusement. The police officers and Milkman make assumptions about Pilate's ignorance, and Pilate, aware of these perceptions, skillfully mobilizes them to crack a self-affirming joke and gently reprimand her nephew for landing himself in jail without anyone—even Milkman—seeing her do it. Pilate's understanding of how the interlocking oppressive ideologies of white supremacy, patriarchy, and class discrimination structure the world and produce stereotypes that attach to her body allows her to hide in plain sight. Unlike Macon's inability to understand Pilate's logic, then, Pilate deftly grasps Macon's logic, even as she refuses its power.

Milkman—instructed and indoctrinated in dominion but not fully given over to its ideological constraints—understands the function of Pilate's performance better than his father, but not quite so fully as does Pilate herself. Thinking over the events at the police station the next day, Milkman feels shame about Pilate's performance, but not just because of how it positioned Pilate in relation to the police and all the forms of power

[332] The fact that Macon and Milkman call this her "Aunt Jemima act" also links this performance up with Mary's ability to disappear into stereotypes, a trope of fugitivity that will appear in the next chapter as well.

and oppression they represent. Rather, Milkman is ashamed that Pilate is "both adept at [this deferential performance] and willing to do it—for him."[333] Milkman's discomfort grows not from shame as his association with Pilate, as his father's does, but instead from the knowledge that this woman respected her tie to Milkman and his family so wholly that she was willing to enact a debased role in exchange for Milkman's freedom. The selflessness of her act, along with her mode of performance, shames Milkman.

However, Milkman's inability to see how Pilate remained present even when strategically enacting a deferential performance indicates that he is still too blinded by the structure of dominion's social world—particularly its emphasis on power and control—to fully see the fugitivity at work within his aunt's apparent obsequiousness. At this moment, he has an inchoate sense of her fugitivity, however, which he reveals when he describes the nature of his aunt's performance at length: "It was this woman…who shuffled into the police station and did a little number for the cops—opening herself up wide for their amusement, their pity, their scorn, their mockery, their disbelief, their meanness, their whimsy, their annoyance, their power, their anger, their boredom—whatever would be useful to her and to himself."[334] He recognizes here that his aunt is not debased but rather has performed debasement strategically—that her vulnerability to the various reactions he imagines her "little number" might evoke was "useful" and intended to serve her purposes, rather than "theirs." Milkman still wrestles with shame, however, because he does not yet recognize that Pilate's freedom comes not from combating the

[333] Morrison, *Song of Solomon,* 208.
[334] Ibid., 210.

police on their terms but existing as herself, even when that self needs to be hidden by the act of signifying in order to stay safe.[335]

The antagonism between Pilate and Macon, then, dialectally produces the path on which Milkman finds himself in the bildungsroman of the novel. As he grows older, Milkman, raised in a home structured by the ideologies of dominion and instructed by that home in how to enact dominion himself, finds no freedom in the capitalistic ownership or patriarchal domesticity that his father says will make him free. Rather, he finds freedom by embracing an ancestral history of fugitivity and reconnecting himself with both the men and women of the black social world in which that fugitivity can be cultivated. Over the course of the novel, he comes to understand the function of dominion for his father more fully, but he still blends this paternal example of dominion and control with the fugitive tools provided to him by Pilate and the communities that formed her to create his own way of being.[336]

Morrison, informed by a black feminism that demands love for black men even in its critique of patriarchy, uses the character of Milkman to map a path to black freedom

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[335] Here again, the relationship between Pilate and Milkman mirrors the relationship between Mary and the protagonist in *Invisible Man*. Both young men grapple with how the protection of these women impacts their selfhood. Both young men feel ashamed of care they do not feel they deserve, perhaps because both misrecognize the "bad debt" that inheres in fugitive homes.

[336] Morrison's own writing on *Song of Solomon* in supports a reading of Milkman as a blend between dominion and fugitivity or what she calls "domination and surrender." Morrison describes Milkman's final act as "commitment to a group *through* ultimate isolation," a paradoxical phrasing that underscores the need to blend "loyalty..and abandon and self-interest" in order to shore up black life and work toward black freedom. See Toni Morrison, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro American Presence in Literature," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 28:1 (Winter 1989):1-34.

through the intentional cultivation of black communal ties and embrace of fugitive practices that have their historical root in forms of black life that existed in enslavement. Pilate is not a slave—she retains a mobility and self-possession not available to those black men and women who built their homes within the oppressive geography of the plantation. However, the fugitive practice that provided escape, survival, and nurturance in the homes of the enslaved still informs the multi-scalar home she builds for herself—that of her own body, her family, her house, and her community. Understanding that the master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house, Pilate accepts the freedoms of emancipation without forgoing the wily set of tools forged by her enslaved ancestors. She is not in the slave world but she is *of* the slave world, and her embrace of this history allows her to use an already existing set of practices to make herself free.

Beloved and the Tragedy of Dominion

Beloved, published 10 years after *Song of Solomon*, offers a critique of black people's aspirations toward dominion which is similar to that of the earlier novel, but it alters both the temporal setting of the aspiration and its characters' relationship to the ideologies that shore up dominion. This text is set years before most of the action of *Song of Solomon*, overlapping only a bit during the period of Reconstruction. Morrison's historically specific novels necessarily frame characters differently depending on the limitations and possibilities of the time period in which they would have lived. However, it is analytically limiting to assume that the characters in Morrison's novels solely reflect the time period in which the novels are set and do not offer any insight into the historical or cultural changes that might have altered the present in which Morrison wrote. In *Song*

of Solomon, the black characters who traffic in dominion engage in its spatial practices as well as ascribing to its underlying ideologies to greater or lesser extent. Baby Suggs, on the other hand, physically alters a space of dominion in order to undermine its ideological demands. However, she also learns that in the absence of protection from the social structures that undergird true dominion, her home remains violable. Baby Suggs' structural engagement with the house at 124 Bluestone then figures Morrison's larger argument about the limitations of dominion as a strategy for black safety. Although Baby Suggs might change the shape of the house, in the absence of whiteness, maleness, or legal ownership, her home only exists at the pleasure of a white man and therefore risks violation at almost any time.

Baby Suggs' has a general preoccupation with the space of 124 Bluestone in the novel—the physical shape of the house, the location of tasks within the space, and the creation, maintenance, and manipulation of boundaries through the demarcation of the yard and the location of doors to the house. She has turned the outdoor kitchen "into a woodshed and toolroom"[337] and had "boarded up the back door that led to it because she said she didn't want to make that journey no more,"[338] evoking and rejecting the path a domestic like herself would have had to walk repeatedly in slavery. Instead, Baby Suggs moves the kitchen inside, making it more like "a cabin"[339] and ensuring no division between cook and guest. By altering the shape of the house and the landscape of its yard,

[337] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987; repr., New York: Vintage, 2004), 244. Citations are to the Vintage edition.
[338] Morrison, *Beloved*, 244.
[339] Ibid.

Baby Suggs spatially undermines the aspect of dominion that demands not only ownership of property but also ownership of or power over persons within a particular geography. She removes the walk from kitchen to house, denying the possibility that she or anyone else will have to engage in the embodied practice of a domestic slave or servant.

However, Baby Suggs also uses spatial practices to reinforce her control over the boundaries of her home in a way that resonates with the dominion of slave-masters.[340] Baby Suggs also builds up a storeroom around the former backdoor "so if you want to get in 124 you have to come by her."[341] Her elimination of the backdoor allows her to serve as guardian of the access points to her home. In dominion, the structure of the landscape ensured the perpetuation and functioning of a master's ostensibly total power over the plantation world and all its inhabitants by controlling the visibility and motion of bodies within its geography. For Baby Suggs, the goal of her policing is to keep danger out in order to create a space of safety for fugitives of slavery and free black people within the still dangerous world of the pre-Civil War North.[342] However, Baby Suggs' home blends these practices of dominion with aspects of fugitivity as well. Within the temporal setting of the novel, the Fugitive Slave Act had extended the boundary of slavery beyond the

[340] See "Fugitive Homes" in Chapter One of this dissertation.
[341] Morrison, *Beloved*, 244.
[342] Note that in both of these cases, the purpose of dominion is to push against the sources of precarity for different groups. Both the slave-master and Baby Suggs see danger encroaching, but for the slave-master that danger is a likely justified undermining of his total power, and for Baby Suggs it is a continued violation of her body and freedom. In both cases, dominion seeks to control external sources of danger through an embodied enactment of power, but what dominion protects can differ.

edge of the slave states, and the black population of Cincinnati still relied on fugitive practices like the creation of gossip networks and an embodied sensation of danger to make and sustain homes in the "free" geography of the North.[343] Baby Suggs' home blends the spatial practices of dominion with the embodied or verbal practices of the fugitive home to create this hybrid space—her home nurtures and protects the social networks the resonate with conceptions of the fugitive home, but it also exists plain sight. Baby Suggs builds her home out of symbols of ownership, access, and claim that would be legible to power, like fences and doors, rather than creating one of the illegible or "messy" homes of fugitivity.[344]

The apocalyptic arrival of Schoolteacher, however, which occurs because both Stamp Paid and Baby Suggs are "looking the wrong way"[345] belies the ability of

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[343] The best example of this kind of practice is the scene where Stamp Paid pretends not to know Judy, a woman who lives down the street, when a white man comes looking for her. Paul D assumes that Stamp actually does not know the woman, but later Stamp reveals to Paul that he "knows everybody." In this moment, however, he obscures his knowledge in the presence of power to keep both himself and Judy hidden. See Morrison, *Beloved*, 274.

[344] A note on the use of "fugitive" in this section: Most of the novels and images discussed in this dissertation take place beyond the end of slavery. Since *Beloved* does not, the use of "fugitive" to describe these homes becomes a bit trickier, as characters in the novel can fulfill the juridical category of "fugitive slave" without necessarily enacting a fugitive home as I theorize it. For example, the Fugitive Slave Act referred to slaves who had stolen themselves away from the plantation, but does not reflect the kinds of home-practice in which a fugitive might engage. Because dominion and fugitivity align with but are not attached to historically-grounded identities, fugitive slaves did not necessarily make fugitive homes, as *Beloved* to some extent reveals. The scope of this chapter limits my ability to fully theorize the distinction between juridical fugitivity and the practice of the fugitive home, however, so I will attempt to indicate and clarify points where this language may get messy and will leave the theorizing to future work.

[345] Morrison, *Beloved*, 184. Morrison uses this phrase to indicate that Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid were distracted by the revelry of the day before and the resentment that hung

dominion to protect homes not also legitimated by its attendant ideologies. As I discussed in the first chapter, even the ostensibly total dominion of the slave master could be disrupted by slaves, paid labor, or family members failing to defer to his power, despite the fact that the interlocking ideologies of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalist ownership supported his claim to it. For Baby Suggs, then, who lacks whiteness, maleness, or legal recognition of her ownership, such a disruption of control or power occurs much more easily. The practice of dominion, divorced from its ideological underpinnings, is insufficient to protect Baby Suggs or her family from disruption, violence, or enslavement. The white slave catchers, slave owner, and sheriff that arrive at her home do not recognize her fence as a boundary they must not cross because they do not recognize her power over space as legitimate. Here, the ideologies that structure dominion on the plantation serve to undermine Baby Suggs' attempt to retain dominion over her home—white supremacy delegitimates her home's boundary. Despite the fact that she had "done everything right…they came in her yard anyway."[346]

Baby Suggs' refrain—"They came in my yard"—replaces language she might use to describe her sense of violation at the arrival of Schoolteacher. Here, Baby Suggs' sense

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in the air following the party. They could neither pick up on the subtle worry in the air, nor did anyone send a warning about the white people riding into town. Both these fugitive ways of knowing—through a secret and communal early warning system or through the embodied knowledge of danger—fail in this moment to shore up and supplement Baby Suggs' dominion, which leads to its violation. Interestingly, it is Baby Suggs' generosity—her positioning of herself as benevolent giver—which, at least in part, keeps the others in the town from warning her of the danger that will soon arrive. This too might be read as exemplary of the risk of engaging in practices of dominion among members of a social world structured by the ideological investments of fugitivity.

[346] Ibid. 247.

of betrayal and resignation resonates with Saidiya Hartman's articulation of the "precarious autonomy"[347] or "burdened individuality"[348] offered to newly freed slaves in the U.S. following the end of the Civil War. Hartman argues that following Emancipation, the forms of overt domination that characterized slavery morphed into a disciplinary domination that perpetuated black subordination through a rhetoric of rights and responsibility. Self-possession characterized black autonomy, encouraging the newly freed to understand themselves and their social position through a rhetoric founded in and imbued with the racialized conceptions of property and liberty that developed in tandem with plantation slavery. Hartman argues that rather than providing freedom, then, this form of autonomy or individuality merely provided the apparatus through which the racist (white supremacist) social and economic structures that produced and sustained the wealth of the nation could continue to exist despite the legal emancipation of slaves.

Although Baby Suggs gains her freedom prior to the Civil War, her experience and articulation of that freedom very much resembles Hartman's description of post-Emancipation rhetoric. The novel describes Baby Suggs' first experience of freedom as the sense that she owns her own hands and the recognition of her own heart beating.[349] This "great heart," now in her possession, leads Baby Suggs to become an "unchurched preacher"[350] who "opened her great heart to those who could use it."[351] Her message is one of self-love—she tells the newly free and fugitive persons who come to see her speak

[347] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 117.
[348] Ibid.
[349] Morrison, *Beloved*, 166.
[350] Ibid., 102.
[351] Ibid.

that although "yonder they do not love your flesh," they must love their own flesh, all of it, and particularly "the beat and beating heart…For this is the prize."[352] The novel explicitly separates this kind of preaching from disciplinary religion that would have told them to "clean up their lives or to go and sin no more."[353] Baby Suggs preaches grace and self-love to the end of helping the newly freed take possession of themselves. Sethe describes how Baby Suggs' preaching had allowed her to "claim herself,"[354] stating that "freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another." For both Sethe and Baby Suggs, then, freedom meant not just loving oneself but *owning* oneself, rather than being owned by anyone else.

However, these "proprietorial conceptions of the self"[355] are a central object of Hartman's critique of post-Emancipation forms of black freedom and personhood. For Hartman, the idea of self-ownership reflects how "the long-standing and intimate affiliation of liberty and bondage made it impossible to envision…personhood and autonomy separate from the sanctity of property,"[356] creating what Hartman, borrowing from Marx, refers to as the "double bind of freedom." Newly freed black persons had obtained possession of themselves and their labor, but were also "free of material resources,"[357] significantly altering their relationship to the category of the citizen in a nation where the ownership of private property underscored conceptions of liberty.

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[352] Ibid., 104.
[353] Ibid., 103.
[354] Ibid., 111.
[355] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection,* 115.
[356] Ibid.
[357] Ibid.

Hartman argues that the rhetoric of self-ownership, rather than describing a form of liberty, served more effectively as a means of making free black people "blameworthy"[358] and providing a justification for perpetuating the subordinate position of black persons despite legal emancipation. Hartman marks the concept of self-ownership as something which provided "freedom" without radically altering the structure of domination, subjugation, and disenfranchisement of blackness on which the nation's economic and social systems depended.

This realization—that the structure of oppression and exposure to violence is carried forward in Emancipation and that self-possession alone offers insufficient protection—finally "tires out" Baby Suggs. It is her resignation to this truth that she tries to communicate to Stamp Paid through the metaphor of her yard:

> "You saying the whitefolks won? That what you saying?"
>
> "I'm saying they came in my yard."
>
> "You saying nothing counts."
>
> "I'm saying they came in my yard."
>
> "Sethe's the one did it."
>
> "And if she hadn't?"
>
> "You saying God give up? Nothing left for us but pour out our own blood?"
>
> "I'm saying they came in my yard." (Morrison, *Beloved*, 211)

Baby Suggs does not answer affirm or deny any of Stamp's accusations or questions, but rather states over and over again that her experience of freedom is now circumscribed by

[358] Ibid, 125.

the knowledge that "they"—in this case white representatives and beneficiaries of slavery—can enter her yard at will, no matter what sense of protection her self-ownership might offer. Although at the time of this conversation Stamp does not understand Baby Suggs' point, he later comes to recognize her "marrow weariness"[359] as the unsurprising outcome of her realization that "the heart that pumped out love, the mouth that spoke the Word, didn't count."[360] Although she might possess herself, she did not possess the "material resources"—property in whiteness and/or property in general—necessary to attain the protections of personhood within the dominant system of power. Denver's conception of her grandmother further cements this connection between Baby Suggs and the limited efficacy of respectability politics: "…what she thought about what the heart and the body could do was wrong…*She had done everything right* and they came in her yard anyway…All she had left was her heart and they busted it so even the War couldn't rouse her."[361] Despite obtaining freedom legally and taking responsibility for that freed self, her selfhood still existed only at the pleasure of whiteness and could be violated or rescinded at any time.

Baby Suggs' repeated invocation of the violation of her yard as rationale for her disappointment and giving-up following what she comes to call "The Misery"—the moment when Schoolteacher arrives at 124 Bluestone and Sethe chooses to kill her child rather than return her to slavery—articulates Morrison's argument about the limited power of dominion as a practice divorced from its supporting ideologies. Much of the

[359] Ibid.
[360] Ibid.
[361] Ibid., 247, my emphasis.

scholarship on *Beloved* sees The Misery as a turning point in the narrative, but most of that critical attention centers on Sethe's non-choice and the inability of the both the reader and the characters within the novel to sufficiently judge Sethe's action as either forgivable or condemnable. I agree that this discomfort with Sethe's choice is central to Morrison's project, but the afterlife of the choice and its impact on the various characters in the novel gives a picture of another layer in Morrison's pedagogical project. In particular, Denver's ability to live through and beyond this choice—her ability to live in a world created in part by the choice her mother made but not completely defined or delimited by that choice—by "go[ing] out the yard" draws on Baby Suggs' metaphor to encourage the next generation to move beyond the limitations of dominion. Baby Suggs' yard, over which she attempts to enact dominion, exists in the novel as both a violable space of potential and an area of confinement. Through this metaphor, Morrison argues that dominion—in particular, its emphasis on control, policing, and self-mastery—risks alienating black persons from the black social world, as it did for Macon Dead in the earlier novel. Only by re-connecting to that black social world and abandoning the "safety" Sethe seeks to create within 124 Bluestone can Denver find a path to thriving.

One common theme among the characters in *Beloved* is their awareness or realization that the limited freedoms they enjoy rest on the permission and protection of a white man to exist. An example of this often cited in the scholarship on *Beloved* is the moment when Sixo justifies his stealing and eating of a shoat as "improving

[Schoolteacher's] property."[362] This leads Schoolteacher to beat Sixo in order to "show him that definitions belong to the definers—not to the defined."[363] This idea haunts Paul D when he begins to think about his own manhood, which only existed on Sweet Home when Mr. Garner was alive. Early in the novel, Paul D marks a difference between the treatment of slaves by Mr. Garner and Schoolteacher, thinking that "in their relationship with Garner was true metal"[364] because he believed, trusted, and listened to the "Sweet Home Men," as he called his enslaved workers. However, the arrival of Schoolteacher to Sweet Home teaches Paul D that their manhood and corollary humanity only existed within a particular geography: "One step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race."[365] On the other hand, Paul D remembers Sixo walking 17 hours each way to see the "Thirty-Mile Woman," called that because she lived on a plantation 30 miles away. Remembering the story, Paul D thinks, "Now *there* was a man."[366] Unlike the Sweet Home Men whose manhood only exists within the boundaries of Garner's plantation and power, Sixo's manhood can carry him to a plantation 30 miles away to see a woman he desires. His manhood is not circumscribed by the geography of Sweet Home or Garner's dominion within it, but rather exists independently of this power structure.

Later in the novel, Paul D begins to reconsider his respect for Mr. Garner and to rethink whether Mr. Garner was really so different from Schoolteacher. Thinking again about how Garner "called and announced them men," Paul D adds the idea that they were

[362] Ibid., 224.
[363] Ibid., 225.
[364] Ibid., 147.
[365] Ibid., 148.
[366] Ibid., 26.

men "only on Sweet Home, and by [Garner's] leave." Once again, Paul compares himself to Sixo, thinking, "That was the wonder of Sixo, and even Halle; it was always clear to Paul D that those two were men whether Garner said so or not."[367] Paul questions his own manhood, wondering whether his ability to do "manly things" was "Garner's gift or his own will."[368] He goes on: "What would he have been anyway—before Sweet Home—without Garner?…Did a whiteman saying it make it so? Suppose Garner woke up one morning and changed his mind? Took the word away. Would they have run then?"[369] Confronted at this point with knowledge about Sethe's "rough choice," he can no longer be so sure that Garner gave the Sweet Home Men much more than Schoolteacher did, since he retained control of them both in spite of and through his ostensibly benevolent bestowal of manhood. Paul D locates within his desire to believe in Garner's version of himself a denial of the wide reality of slavery—a willful disbelief of Baby Suggs and Sixo's stories of other plantations—combined with a willingness to put up "with anything and everything, just to stay alive in a place where a moon he had no right to was nevertheless there."[370] Garner's version of slavery allows the Sweet Home Men[371] to see

[367] Ibid., 260.
[368] Ibid.
[369] Ibid.
[370] Ibid.
[371] Sethe also evinces a similar sense of attachment to Sweet Home that allows her to put up with the institution of slavery in exchange for the benefits to her personally—her ability to marry Halle, her protection from sexual violence, her permission to put flowers in the kitchen while she worked. In both cases, the enjoyment of these privileges limits the slaves' access to other more permanent or sustainable forms of liberation. Sethe, like the Sweet Home Men, trusts the white slaveowner and white mistress to protect their autonomy, only to find that in the absence of the master or in the weakness of the

themselves as "protected and…special,"[372] which gives them the ability to ignore the sweeping scope of the institution of slavery or the dehumanization of blackness fundamental to its functioning and perpetuation. After Garner's death, the slaves on Sweet Home, Paul D included, come to learn that the kind of "freedom" Garner offered—a liberty and selfhood "only at his leave" and within the boundaries of his dominion—becomes worthless without a white man protecting it.

In the novel's depiction of the Sweet Home Men and Paul D's later grappling with the nature of their selfhood, Hartman's description of the circumscribed nature of black freedom post-Emancipation once again resonates. Morrison's text encourages the reader to see "freedom" named such by the "definers" rather than the "defined" as inherently precarious and necessarily limited. This pessimism aligns with Hartman's, aptly illustrating the frustration, disappointment, and "marrow weariness" produced by a lack of real autonomy for certain kinds of bodies within the American structure of liberty. By focusing on "the Misery" and its aftermath, much of the scholarship on *Beloved* perpetuates this line of thought and risks limiting the message of the novel to only its warning and not its pedagogy for life.

If Baby Suggs' last words—that "there was no bad luck in the world but whitepeople…[because] they don't know when to stop"[373]—had been her final speaking in the novel, a pessimistic reading of *Beloved* might prove the best fit. However, Baby

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mistress, that autonomy disappears. Perhaps her attachment to the protections of their dominion also underscores her own later attachment to dominion's promises.

[372] Morrison, *Beloved*, 260.

[373] Ibid., 122.

Suggs returns as a spirit or imagination later in the novel to encourage Denver to leave her yard in order to find someone to help her battle Beloved so she might save her mother. Denver, poised at the edge of the porch, remembers her grandmother speaking to her mother about the danger and trouble of whitepeople, punctuated by Baby Suggs' defeated statement that "this ain't a battle; it's a rout."[374] However, when Denver finds herself paralyzed with fear of the world beyond the yard, she hears Baby Suggs' laughter and her voice wondering why Denver cannot remember the history of her family and their suffering in slavery: "You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don't remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother's feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that? Is that why you can't walk down the steps?"[375] Baby Suggs voice carries the ancestral knowledge of life in slavery, which she mobilizes in this moment to impress upon Denver that her people had already survived horrors and violence, and certainly no worse horrors than those encountered in slavery existed within the black social world beyond the yard. Recognizing the continuities between pre- and post-Emancipation vulnerability, Denver responds to her grandmother's questions by thinking, "But you said there was no defense," to which Baby Suggs responds, "There ain't." When Denver asks Baby Suggs, "Then what do I do?" Baby offers a key piece of instruction: "Know it, and go on out the yard."[376]

[374] Ibid., 287.
[375] Ibid., 287-288.
[376] Ibid., 288.

In this scene, Morrison actively unties the intractable knot of ubiquitous and inalterable vulnerability she had created earlier in the novel. Once again, the yard represents the relationship between safety and self, this time for Denver. For Sethe and Denver, following Sethe's rough choice and their expulsion from the black social world in Cincinnati, dominion's promises of privacy and sustenance for the self paradoxically serve to cut the women in 124 off from the resources that would in fact sustain them. Sethe's actions throughout the novel, including her "rough choice," resonate more with the structures of dominion than the structures of the fugitive home. Sethe seeks control over precarity rather than producing a life that can bear contingency. I am not interested in judging this desire in Sethe, as it is born out of precipitous and unending losses and violations of self over the course of a lifetime[377] and seems profoundly rational. However, the novel suggests, both through the resentment of Baby Suggs by her neighbors following the feast she throws and through Sethe's debilitating attachment to one child and one space, that dominion's promise of control and protection can become detrimental to one's thriving.

As Sethe wastes away, Denver must leave her yard, which had been, up to that point, her "whole world." Baby Suggs, recognizing that she has painted the world as so dangerous and destructive that Denver should never leave the yard, attempts to correct this mistake by telling Denver not necessarily to forget the danger—"Know it"—but to leave the yard anyway. She offers this advice explicitly to contradict her earlier equation

[377] In this way, Sethe's attachment to dominion descends from a similar root as Macon Dead's. In both cases, Morrison seems less interested in judging the attachment and more interested in describing how it interferes with individual thriving and freedom.

of life pre- and post-Emancipation as equally fraught, evidenced by her invocation of history and Denver's lack of knowledge about it as a surprise and as the likely cause of Denver's paralysis. Through the character of Denver, Morrison asserts that the generations that did not personally suffer the horrors of slavery but which remain aware of their lasting impact on the possibilities for black life must be able to venture beyond the bounds of the haunted house that incubates this troubled history. By venturing beyond the boundaries of the yard—a legible home which in the novel exists only with permission from white power structures—and into the black social world, Denver and the generations she represents can mediate the precarity inherent to the history of violence by inhabiting a fugitive home.

Beloved is not an optimistic novel.[378] In comparison with *Song of Solomon*, for example, the text appears cynical about the practical possibilities of fugitivity as a means of liberation.[379] However, the novel still encourages an incorporation of fugitive practices into post-Emancipation life as a means of mediating the impact and effects of a violent history on life in the present. In her advice to Denver, Baby Suggs reverses the direction of movement, encouraging her granddaughter to "go on out the yard" rather than worrying about what might come *in* the yard. In other words, rather than engaging in practices of dominion that emphasize personal power and control as a means of limiting precarity, Denver must seek the social networks of the fugitive home in order to bear

[378] See note 280 for more on the nature of optimism.
[379] For example, Sixo, the character most closely aligned with ideal fugitivity in the novel, dies a violent death at the hands of Schoolteacher, and although he is able to pass on his genetic material to a son or daughter, he will not be present in the home that cultivates that next generation.

life's contingency. Life in a house or home that exists only at the "leave" of whiteness does not offer protection to the black self at the same level as a connection to the fugitive public—anything can come in the yard at any time. By going out the yard, however, Denver can alter how her home produces a threshold between self and the social world, allowing her access to the social world that will save her mother which will continue to sustain her home.[380]

While *Beloved* does resonate with Hartman's critique of the possibility of black freedom in a system of liberty structured by the antagonism between slave and free, Morrison works against the pessimism that could be engendered by such a critique by offering the character of Denver as a counterpoint to her depictions of the inescapable degradations of slavery. Stephen Best, in his article "On Failing to Make the Past Present," marks *Beloved* as a text that contributed to the watershed moment in black studies when slavery became integral to discussions of the present and when the "collective condition" of living post-enslavement became a guiding framework for black politics. Best wants to critique these foundational concepts, using *A Mercy* to argue that Morrison herself revised her stance on the perpetual loss ensuing from the history of slavery in a later novel. I agree with Best's assertion that Morrison as an author maintains a more complicated relationship to the slave past than scholarship on her novels might indicate. However, I think the complications in her stance exist within *Beloved* itself as much as they do in other novels. Morrison has said that *Beloved* depicts the fruitlessness

[380] Sethe is saved by a group of women who come to 124 in order to exorcise Beloved, further supporting the notion that the social world or fugitive public in Cinncinnati is the true source of safety and salvation for the characters in the novel.

of the kind of forgetting necessary to survival,[381] but "knowing" the historical memory of enslavement does not necessarily precipitate a melancholic relationship with slavery. Denver presents a futurity founded in the knowledge of a violent past but living beyond the limitations prescribed by the violent system it produced. As with Milkman in *Song of Solomon*, generational descent provides the possibility of selective retention and deployment of historical knowledge for the purposes of black thriving in the present. Encouraging neither freedom through ignorance of danger nor paralysis in the face of that danger, Morrison's pedagogical project in *Beloved* is an encouragement of cautious exploration, bolstered by communal practices that have protected black life since the time of slavery, while also enjoying the freedoms permitted by historical change.

The figure of the yard at 124 Bluestone, then, exists throughout the novel as a metaphor for the inefficacy of dominion as a means of cultivating, nurturing, and protecting black selves post-Emancipation and into the present. Before The Misery, Baby Suggs creates safety in her home by restructuring its geography to destroy the pathways familiar to the enslaved and to create defensible routes into and out of the home. She preaches deep love and self-possession to undermine the oppressive logics and ideologies of slavery. Following The Misery, however, the boundaries of the home become confining and limiting, first through Baby Suggs' surrender to her bed where she can contemplate colors, and second through the figure of Beloved, who completely controls the space of the home by using Sethe's desire to protect her to manipulate her, which

[381] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993): 222.

eventually threatens to destroy Sethe completely. These ambivalent depictions of the role of the house and yard at 124 Bluestone underscore the idea that dominion as a strategy can be both useful and harmful, but in the absence of black communal support or the legitimation of dominant ideologies, dominion can do as much harm as good.

HYBRIDITY IN *HOME*

In *Home*, Morrison moves beyond *Song of Solomon*'s optimistic embrace of fugitivity and antagonism and *Beloved*'s critique of black dominion to imagine a lifeworld in which black persons can find rest, nurturance, and love through a blending of techniques. As I argued above, both of the earlier books point toward a blending of fugitivity and dominion that links the black home with both the fugitive tradition that sustained black life during slavery and the new privileges and possibilities for black life post-Emancipation. This later book, however, describes a set of nurturing homes that are spaces of salvation, protection, and defense that simultaneously traffic in the communal practices of fugitivity and its forms of knowledge, and the demarcation, claiming, and defense of space and property attached to dominion. These nurturing homes resonate with Katherine McKittrick's description of the "plot" as a space that sustained and sustains black life and freedom both on the plantation in the "post-plantation" world structured by the ideologies of slavery and its necropolitics.[382] By refusing to put perpetual racial violence or antagonism at the center of the narrative, Morrison engages in the kind of project McKittrick locates as a genealogical descendent of strategies for survival and thriving on the plantation. These strategies are not inherently fugitive, as they must

[382] McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," 4.

remain in place and resist antagonizing white domination, but they create a black home that incubates, nurtures, sustains, and produces a particular kind of self. These are not wholly fugitive homes, but they produce selves that are fugitive to structures of power.

The text uses Ethel Fordham's garden to assert its world-view, similar to the way *Beloved* used Baby Suggs' yard. The novel never offers a description of the interior of Ethel's house, but Morrison spends a lengthy paragraph describing in detail the garden she keeps in her backyard. According to the text, Ethel is an "aggressive gardener" who "blocked or destroyed enemies and nurtured plants"[383] through a set of defensive and boundary-marking practices Morrison describes at length: "Slugs curled and died under vinegar-seasoned water. Bold, confident raccoons cried and ran away when their tender feet touched crushed newspaper or chicken wire placed around plants. Cornstalks safe from skunks slept in peace under paper bags." By benefit of these defenses, the plants in her garden can grow and thrive without worry. The novel describes this garden as "so much more than" Eden, because "for her the whole predatory world threatened her garden, competing with its nourishment, its beauty, its benefits, and its demands. And she loved it."[384] Ethel's garden is beloved not because it exists free from danger but because it is a space that needs fierce protection from a predatory world. In the absence of Ethel's policing, the garden does not survive, and the garden's need for protection serves as the

[383] Toni Morrison, *Home* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 130.
[384] Ibid.

source of Ethel's love for it. Ethel's garden, then, represents a fugitive space descended from enslavement—the plot—as well as a space over which she practices dominion.[385]

Just as the "whole predatory world" threatens Ethel's garden, *Home* describes a "whole predatory world" that works to undermine, disenfranchise, physically harm, and shame black life and black persons. However, black communal knowledge also populates this predatory world, providing spaces of respite and protection where selves can be nurtured and grow. From the first moment of the novel when Frank wakes up in a mental hospital having done something he cannot remember, the characters in the novel lead the reader through the gauntlet of dangers black persons must navigate in order to survive in segregated America. During Frank's sojourn from the Pacific Northwest back to rural Georgia, he relies on the knowledge and generosity of the black people he encounters to help him navigate the unfamiliar spaces through which he moves. Cee, too, relies on the support and assistance of neighbors to find work in Atlanta after her husband leaves her. Frank is able to save Cee with relatively little interference because of the support of the doctor's maid. In each of these scenes, the bonds of affection and mutual reliance between black people, even strangers, create spaces of escape and rest where black life can thrive despite the threatening world of white supremacy and power. In this way, Ethel's garden serves as a microcosm of the whole world that *Home* describes—a space

[385] The reference to the garden of Eden in the text reminds the reader of the Christian ideology in which humankind has dominion over the earth. The idea of dominion theorized in this dissertation also resonates with this idea, as in both cases there is a sense of simultaneous obligation to and power over a particular space and all the bodies within it.

of nurturance and thriving within a predatory world dead-set on throttling and thieving benevolent life.[386]

Ethel's fierce protection of her garden also mirrors the temperaments of the "country women who loved mean"[387] that take care of Cee at Ethel's house. When Frank rescues Cee from the doctor's house in Atlanta, his experimentation on the girl has caused grave injury to her womb and she is on the verge of death.[388] Frank takes her to Ethel's house where she sets about healing what the doctor has hurt. When her treatments fail to work, she calls in the neighbor women to help her cure the illness. The language used to describe the women's approach to treatment parallels the language with which Morrison describes Ethel's gardening. The text states that these women "handled sickness as though it were an affront, an illegal, invading braggart who needed whipping."[389] Strongly worded demands accompany Cee's treatment—"Spread your legs. This is going

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[386] The garden as metaphor for black life appears both within McKittrick's article, which girds many of the claims made in this dissertation, as well as in Alice Walker's seminal *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983). Walker uses "our mother's gardens" to represent the strategies of world-making passed down through generations of black women, which has always been black feminism and which helps to articulate its claims in the 1980s and into the present.
[387] Morrison, *Home*, 121.
[388] Cee's interactions with the doctor she works for parallel the history of medical abuse against black and enslaved women, particularly during the early days of medical experimentation and practice in the U.S. For example, J. Marion Sims, widely considered the father of gynecology, make many of his revolutionary surgical discovered by performing painful and repeated surgeries on his un-anesthetized slaves. For more on this history see Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008).
[389] Morrison, *Home*, 121.

to hurt"[390]—illustrating the overlap between the banishment of bad things and the nurturing of good in the culture of Lotus. The women respond to her suffering with "resigned contempt," and they berate her for allowing a doctor to make her sick in the first place: "'Men know a slop jar when they see one.' 'You ain't a mule to be pulling some evil doctor's wagon.' 'You a privy or a woman?' 'Who told you you was trash?'" These harsh criticisms serve not to undermine Cee but rather to encourage her growth and strength by reminding her that she deserves better and was foolish to accept the treatment she received.

In Ethel's garden, predator and plant are two different objects. In Cee's case, however, the boundary between predator and prey exists both within and outside of her body and self. Through their "demanding love,"[391] the women attempt to rout the dangerous thing *within* Cee—her inability to see herself without filtering the image through the dominant ideologies which undermined her humanity. While the doctor is responsible for the damage to her physical body, the women are keenly aware that Cee's internalization of harmful ideologies, as much as anything else, put her physical body at risk. Here fugitive practices reveal themselves. Rather than confronting power—in this case, the white doctor for whom Cee worked—the women choose to cultivate in Cee the ability to exist beyond the ideologies that created his power in the first place.

The garden then also serves as a figure through which Morrison describes the social cultivation necessary to resist the emotional or psychological degradations possible

[390] Ibid.
[391] Ibid., 125.

in the predatory world of the novel. After Cee has healed, Ethel sits with her on the porch, and the novel tells us that with "eyes fixed on her garden,"[392] the woman tells Cee that she cannot let Lenore or anyone else define her to herself. Bringing up the farmer who killed the goose that laid the golden eggs, Ethel asserts that Lenore loved gold too much and took her wealth as a sign that she was better than others in the community. Ethel wonders why the farmer killed the goose rather than "plow[ing] his land, seed[ing] it, and grow[ing] something to eat." Here Ethel asserts that the accumulation of gold matters far less than the seeding of land that can bear food, invoking the image of the garden again to assert the primacy of cultivation in matters of survival or thriving. When Cee laughs at Ethel's discussion of the farmer, she responds with a speech that bears quoting at length: "Look to yourself. You free. Nothing and nobody is obliged to save you but you. *Seed your own land*. You young and a woman and there's serious limitation in both, but you a person too. Don't let Lenore or some trifling boyfriend and certainly no devil doctor decide who you are. That's slavery. Somewhere inside you is that free person I'm talking about. Locate her and let her do some good in the world."[393] Here, Ethel explicitly links the metaphor of seeding land with the concept of self-definition which which Morrison imbues her fugitive characters. In both *Song of Solomon*, where Pilate comes to define her values beyond those prescribed by the wider world, and in *Beloved*, when Sixo is beaten for defining himself to Schoolteacher, Morrison's fugitive characters gain and assert their freedom through the cultivation of self-definition against

[392] Ibid.
[393] Ibid., 126.

and beyond the definitions offered by those with social power. In *Home*, Morrison reiterates this argument in no uncertain terms: allowing anyone else to define you is slavery. Ethel suggests that in order to stay free from the definitions of others, Cee must "seed her own land"—must cultivate a sense of selfhood that might allow her to thrive in the predatory world.

In all three of the novels discussed in this chapter, self-definition and black communal knowledge are facets of fugitive home that create freedom within geographies of oppression. The homes that provide respite to Frank and Cee in *Home*, however, do not embody the fugitive to the same extent as Pilate's or Sixo's homes. Rather, like Baby Suggs' house before The Misery, these homes blend the knowledge practices that characterize the fugitive home with a control over the landscape and the spatial defensibility associated with dominion.[394] In Ethel's garden in particular, the strict demarcation of boundaries through spatial means and her "aggressive" policing of them aligns more closely to dominion than the fugitive home. However, the cultivation that goes on within the garden owes more to the garden plots of the enslaved than to a power-seeking sense of dominion. The novel also critiques accumulation and leisure at the expense of others, which are both attributes of dominion rather than fugitivity. Lenore, for example, loves gold and privacy, and the novel paints her as destructive to Cee's sense of self and distanced from the supportive community of black women in Lotus. Ethel and her neighbors, on the other hand, had "no excess in their gardens because they

[394] Both the Reverend's house that Frank visits very early in the novel and the home he stays in when he is in Chicago that allows its son to grow "deep" also share the characteristics of Ethel's nurturing garden.

shared everything. There was no trash or garbage in their homes because they had a use for everything."[395] Ethel's garden does not exist to create capitalist surplus that can be traded for wealth, and any excess created benefits the town's community. Lotus lacks the capitalist drive of the plantation home, exhibiting instead a fugitive desire for the creation and support of collective life.[396] Ethel's thriving home in *Home* is a hybrid space—in-place, bounded, and policed, but populated by persons who support rather than control one another, and who socialize one another through demanding love rather than just demand.[397]

The figure of the garden in *Home* calls to mind Baby Suggs' invocation of her yard in *Beloved*, in that both novels offer a bounded outdoor space near the home, produced by an ancestor figure, through which Morrison deals with questions of violation and protection for black lives. *Beloved*'s yard evinces the inefficacy of dominion for black women in a world still defined by the perpetual violence of slavery, resonating with Hartman's Afro-pessimist vision of the temporal bleeding of practices of enslavement out

[395] Morrison, *Home*, 123.
[396] References to communism in the 1950s pepper *Home*. Communist writers, often on the blacklist, wrote most of the media mentioned in the text—particularly the plays and movies that the characters work on or see. While Morrison doesn't make any explicit arguments about the relationship between blackness and the blacklist, the number of references to persecution of communists and her description of a communistic approach by the women in Lotus is not likely an accident. Future research could explore this connection in more depth.
[397] The women in Lotus also resonate with Mary from *Invisible Man*, as Pilate did. Mary, too, offers up "demanding love," and it is interesting that in the absence of the masculinist desires of the protagonist or Milkman, the "discomfort" of these demands has less purchase in the narrative.

of the past and into the present. In *Beloved*, "there is no defense"[398] for spaces of self-making, and the only way to be free is to leave the yard, abandoning dominion for engagement with the wider black community. *Home*, however, offers a counterpoint to this idea, arguing that the fierce policing of space can be fused with fugitive knowledge and black communal bonds to allow the cultivation of selves and spaces free from external definition and interference. In *Home*, Morrison troubles the boundary between fugitivity and dominion, asserting a hybridity between the two as the best means of cultivating free black selves.

Katherine McKittrick's theoretical work on the plot-in-plantation helps to frame Morrison's project as a specific kind of counter-narrative to the dominations of the plantation and the subsequent perpetuation of its logic. McKittrick argues that the plot—both as a lived practice that cultivated space in plantation geography and as a characteristic part of the novel as a form—has a long history. Drawing from the work of Sylvia Wynter, McKittrick argues that the plot "illustrates a social order that is developed within the context of a dehumanizing system as it spatializes what would be considered impossible under slavery: the actual growth of narratives, food, and cultural practices that materialize the deep connections between blackness and the earth and foster values that challenge systemic violence."[399] The plot and plantation neither fully work together to constitute a world, nor do they exist in antagonism. Rather, McKittrick argues that both spaces, or perhaps the space of the plantation and the space-within-a-space of the plot, are

[398] Morrison, *Beloved*, 288.
[399] McKittrick, "Plantation Futures," 10.

"locations through which blackness becomes rooted in the Americas."[400] Although much scholarly and literary attention has been paid to the violence and dispossession of the space of the plantation in recent years, McKittrick urges her readers to understand that the garden plot that sustained black life and supplemented the rations of the plantation also serves as a foundational experience of black life in the Americas. By giving space, breath, and thought to the plot as well as the plantation, scholars and writers can break out of the cycle of plantation logic that naturalizes the "unending black death"[401] that stretches from slavery into the present. Remembering the plot disrupts the repetition of the rhetoric of the plantation as solely violent, offering a "new analytical ground that puts forth a knowledge system"[402] not locked in an endless antagonism with the dominations of the plantation but already existing and perhaps thriving within and despite the dominations of that geography.

Morrison's emphasis on Ethel's garden resonates with McKittrick's call to remember the history of black *life* that grows out of the practices and geography of the plantation, rather than becoming so mired in its oppressions and degradations that they seem like a "natural, inevitable, and normal way of life."[403] Through the figure of Ethel's garden, McKittrick's implicit critique of Afro-pessimist thought tracks onto Morrison's novel, revealing the author's move to a more blatant invocation of black life-ways in service of finding a way to live through and beyond a violent history. Within the space of

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[400] Ibid.
[401] Ibid.
[402] Ibid., 11.
[403] Ibid.

Ethel's home, mirrored in the figure of her garden, Cee comes to realize that she must "seed her own land"—must define herself beyond the confines of dominant ideologies—in order to ameliorate the risk of abuse at the hands of individuals who exist above her on oppressive social hierarchies. All three novels discussed here use the figure of the home to assert something about the possibility of resistance, but Ethel's home is not Pilate's idle, disorganized living room nor Baby Suggs' indefensible yard. Ethel's home is a bounded and policed piece of property that successfully mobilizes some select practices of dominion in the service of producing black selves that might be fugitive to structures of dominant power. This radical staying-put connects Ethel's home genealogically to the "secretive histories"[404] of extant black plantation life McKittrick locates in the figure of the plot. While the women of Lotus do build fugitive homes, they allow those homes to attach to place and police their boundaries in a way that resonates with the practices of dominion.

The staying-put of this home, however, does not negate its fugitive nature. As I wrote in the first chapter, my thinking about fugitivity and the fugitive home stems not from the image of the fugitive slave escaping slavery by moving to the North or to Canada, but rather from the fugitive slave that lived on or near the plantation, retaining familial and social ties while subtly undermining the power of the slave-master through absence and theft. Ethel's garden does not move away from or reject its geographical location in a Southern state—it does not flee north—but at the same time, its rootedness, order, and boundaries do not surrender to or align themselves with dominant ideologies

[404] Ibid., 10.

of power. Ethel's practice in the garden—the creation and protection of boundaries, the separation of good or sustaining forms of life from their bad or predatory enemies—mimics the spatial practice of plantation mastery. However, Ethel's garden exists to support communal rather than individual power and does not demand the subjugation or disciplining of human bodies to shore up its existence and importance. At a different point in the novel, Morrison describes hard labor as the kind of work which "broke the body but freed up the mind for dreams of vengeance, images of illegal pleasure—even ambitious schemes of escape."[405] Similarly, Ethel's home anchors her body to a physical space but frees her up to imagine ways to know herself unfettered by white supremacist and patriarchal ideologies that could disrupt her self-definition. By sustaining and nurturing physical life, this rooted geography supports the production of selves that do not rely on dominant structures of power to survive and therefore can remain fugitive to those systems of power. Ethel's home is not fugitive of all normative structures of life, but it selectively invests in those that sustain her and her community without abandoning the fugitive definitions of self that help her, and Cee as well, resist domination.

MORRISON'S PEDAGOGY

By looking at both the changes and similarities between the homes in her novels across a wide time-span, it becomes clear that Morrison always advocates a blended approach, centered around the practice of self-definition and only embracing the aspects of either dominion or the fugitive home that function to make stronger, more proactive, and more nurturing spaces for black selves. Even in *Song of Solomon*, where Morrison is

[405] Morrison, *Home*, 119.

arguably most critical of normative domesticity and its impact on black selfhood and liberation, neither Pilate nor Macon emerges from their entrenched antagonism as the victor—rather, in the character of Milkman, the author offers that socialization in both fugitivity and dominion creates descendants that can best embrace both the history and tradition of black life in America and the possibilities and power available to black people post-Civil Rights. In *Beloved* also, Denver, a descendant figure, finds a way to live more freely by keeping a house at 124 Bluestone but also being willing to rely on the black community beyond its walls. She is saved not by the privacy of dominion but by the forms of communal knowledge and protection that exist in fugitive communities. The novel, however, does not demand that she give up her household to be part of the wider community. By the time Morrison published *Home* in 2012, the ancestor figure herself would engage in a blended home practice, which Cee could learn directly rather than creating from various inputs as a descendent. Ethel Fordham's home is not a departure for Morrison, however, but is simply a more direct and stringent articulation of Morrison's assertion that nurturing spaces for blackness in the 20th century must reject the ideologies of dominion while retaining its useful spatial practices, and must embrace the communalism and self-definition of fugitivity's socialization practice while rejecting its demands for invisibility and perpetual rootlessness.

Over the course of her career as a writer and thinker, Morrison has consistently side-stepped a revolutionary politics, choosing instead to imagine ways of living through and living with the structure of racial antagonism through the embrace of fugitive practices and the recognition of what kind of life is worth living. Through her

complicated engagements with home-space and her invocation of the historical forms of home that existed in plantation slavery, Morrison pushes back against Wilderson's conception of the inescapability of racial antagonism and Hartman's assertion that the violences of slavery did not end so much as change forms, using the figure of the plot-in-plantation to evince the extant forms of black life and thriving that neither antagonize whiteness nor suffer under its oppression. Morrison's fiction seeks to locate, describe, inhabit, and reproduce existing spaces and forms of black thriving within oppressive histories in order to articulate a livable politics that works toward black freedom on both an individual and social level. Morrison's fiction understands the particular precarity of black life in America while communicating means of ameliorating that precarity that do not demand further violence, dispossession, or loss for black Americans. Locating the secretive histories within the narrative of domination, Morrison's engagement with home undermines the totality of plantation logic and offers a vision of black freedom rooted in historical practices in the U.S.

Chapter Four —Subtle Subversion and Fugitive Threat: Carrie Mae Weems' *American Icons*

The scene is ordinary: A kitchen sink, flanked by a drying rack full of dishes and a glass jar holding a bouquet of wooden spoons, anchors the bottom of the image. To the upper right and left, two wooden cabinets hang from the wall with their doors closed, and a clock indicating that it is a few minutes past nine sits equidistant between them. All objects exist in the same plane with a limited depth of field and no human form among them. The careful placement of the objects signals the constructed-ness of the still life. At the center of the image, a ceramic Aunt Jemima smiles, kerchief wrapped around her head, at what would be eye-level if someone stood at the sink. This racist caricature grins out of the scene, disrupting the ordinary with a reminder of the real and symbolic violence perpetrated against women of color who have worked in and created domestic spaces such as this one. Or perhaps the presence of this figure within an ordinary scene speaks to the ordinariness of that violence, rather than disrupting anything. Or yet more subversively: maybe Aunt Jemima returns the gaze of the viewer, looking directly in his or her eyes, and the smile is a bit more ominous than obsequious, hiding a quiet resistance or threat beneath her happy countenance.

In *Untitled (With Kitchen Clock)*, as in all of the images from Carrie Mae Weems' *American Icons* series (1988-1989), racist objects—ashtrays, salt-and-pepper shakers, thermometers, figurines—appear in mundane domestic still-life scenes. Unlike the direct confrontation of the gaze offered by her most famous set of photographs *The Kitchen*

Table Series (1990) or the incendiary language displayed on the images in *Ain't Jokin* (1987-1988), *American Icons*' small but loaded objects within mundane scenes offer a more subtle cultural critique. Invoking the tropes of the still life genre while using playful compositional techniques to resist definitive readings, the photographs in this series animate overdetermined racist objects in order to encourage the viewer to inhabit the uncanny space created by the repressed history of the violences and vulnerabilities of domestic slavery. The photographs themselves work on multiple levels, drawing on lived history, a history of objects, and the history of still life to engage a variety of viewers in different ways depending on the lexicon they use to make the images legible. At core, however, the series pushes back against the image of domestic servants as docile human-objects existing within a scene of total power on the part of the master by implying resistance, mischief, absence, and threat—at core, a fundamental indeterminacy—through the composition and execution of the photographs and the racist objects they depict.

Through this indeterminacy, Weems' *American Icons* make visual both a historical reality of black life in white domestic space and the attendant Afro-pessimist theorizations of blackness that arise from that historical truth. In particular, the presence of objects that reflect a deadened or objectified blackness but threaten to animate invokes the "paradox of the resisting object"[406] fundamental to theories of black social death and its relation to black life. Drawing from Jared Sexton's thinking about the impossibility of black life in "The Social Life of Social Death" and Darieck Scott's work on abjection, this chapter argues that the *American Icons* series indexes the iconography of American

[406] Spillers, "Afro Pessimism and the Elders."

racism while suggesting that, via the invisibility produced through such overdetermined stereotypes, black subjects might be able to find power or freedom. Weems makes visible the presence of black life in spaces of abjection, imbuing her images with a fugitive indeterminacy that refuses the overdetermination of the objects they depict.

American Icons and the Still Life Genre

Although Weems' work has received much critical attention since her first gallery shows in the 1980s, few critics and scholars have written about the *American Icons* series. Even her retrospective and the museum exhibit guides dedicated to her solo shows devote precious few pages to this series of images. While part of this dearth of attention might be owed to *American Icons* being an earlier series in the course of her career, the resonance between these images and the art historical genre of still life certainly also contributes to the status of these images within Weems' wider oeuvre. Her most famous work, *The Kitchen Table Series*, exists somewhere between portraiture and staged photography, and her other more notable projects often blend portraiture with installation or the production and display of art-objects. *American Icons*, on the other hand, aligns most closely with the genre of still life in that its photographs depict mundane scenes in the absence of people or narrative. Still life emerged as a genre meant to be domestic adornment or a study to refine technique, and since its inception, it has been considered a "lower" form of art—one meant more for personal collecting than for art historical debate.

Norman Bryson attributes this disinterest in still life to both its "remove from narrative,"[407] due to its lack of human figures or depiction of events, and its investment in the mundane. One of Bryson's central contentions is that because still life depicts everyday objects created collectively by generations of humans rather than individually by one identifiable human actor, high valuation of still life threatens those who invest in the individuality of human invention or genius: "All such objects are tied to actions repeated by every user in the same way, across generational time; they present the life of everyman as far more a matter of repetition than of personal originality or invention."[408] Still life gives primacy to the "*sleep* of culture,"[409] valorizing a world produced and sustained through habit rather than historical action. This reorientation undermines the role of art to mark and give import to individual human achievement and importance, which Bryson argues makes those in power uncomfortable. Critics and commenters in the art world value still life less highly both because of and in service to hegemonic notions of the centrality of human individuals to both art and history. Weems' series of still life photographs, then, make less of a critical splash than her other works because they call upon a genre with ostensibly less art historical importance than portraiture, installation, or sculpture. Still life traffics in objects that might normally go unnoticed—objects that might be invisible in the context of a larger work.

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[407] Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990), 9.
[408] Ibid., 139.
[409] Ibid., 140

However, Weems' *American Icons* strategically engages still life in service of her larger purpose—to question assumptions about the privacy/sanctity of domesticity and to evoke the uncanny memory of the historical violence that underlies it. The genre of still life categorically does not include human figures, and Weems' images are no exception. However, by including racist objects intended to mimic and mock human beings, Weems forces a consideration on the part of the viewer about what exactly the racist figures elicit. Certainly a Mammy and Uncle Mose salt-and-pepper shaker set are not human figures in the way that the living bodies featured in Weems' *Kitchen Table Series* are, but despite all their function as kitchen objects, the salt-and-pepper shaker were still designed to look like people, even if the people they depict are wholly fictional stereotypes. There is no human subject in the image, then, but the viewer's eye finds the subject of the image in the racist figurine, blurring the line between object and human and pointing to a history in which that line was also profoundly difficult to draw.

Weems' later work supports this reading. Particularly in *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, a well-represented collection in the scholarship on the artist, Weems directly confronts the genre of portraiture and its use in the field of anthropology to turn human subjects into objectified types and to strip them of their individual identity. Here too Weems signifies on[410] a genre (in this case, eugenist or early anthropological portraits) to the end of pointing out how differently racialized subjects necessarily

[410] I use the term "signify" here, as in previous chapters, to reference Gates' canonical text *The Signifying Monkey*. For a description of this concept see pages 108-109. For more on the relationship between signifying and fugitive homes in plantation slavery, see Chapter One.

experienced the creation and use of this genre in a different way than those in positions of power or cultural domination. In *The Kitchen Table Series*, Weems plays with the genre of staged photography made popular in the 1970s and 1980s, making herself central as both photographer and photographic subject. In both of these collections, as well as in other moments throughout her work, Weems plays with the line between photographer and photographic subject, and between subject and object, in order to point to the historical messiness between these binary categories, particularly in the realm of photography, and to make the line even more messy in her contemporary moment. *American Icons* evinces the same desire to point out a violent history that dehumanized persons and made them into objects of property, although perhaps more playfully and less explicitly than in her later work.

Still life is fertile ground for this kind of discussion. Bryson argues that still life exists at the nexus of three "cultural zones": an everyday world of domesticity and habit, or "life of the table," as discussed above; the semiotics that code that world; and the material practice of painting.[411] The three zones function dialectically to create the moment of a still life, and Bryson states that none can be separated from the others except in analysis, as "the symbolism followed by painting interacts with cultural symbolism

[411] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked,* 14. Weems of course is not painting her images, but there is still a material practice involved in the production of a photographic print. Particularly in the case of these images, Weems is also taking domestic objects, not traditionally or easily included in archives, and turning them into photographs, and art photographs at that, which will more easily fit in the archive and which are more likely to be valued and retained. For more on photography as a practice that changes the archival state of objects, see Ann Cvetkovich, "Photographing Objects as Queer Archival Practice," in *Feeling Photography,* Elspeth H. Brown and Thy Phu, eds. (Durham: Duke UP, 2014), 281.

outside painting, the economics of the studio interact with wider economic life, [and] the culture of the domestic interior is woven at every point into the public world which surrounds it."[412] In other words, the nature of still life is to both reflect and inform material practices of mundane domesticity and human necessity through an artistic technique informed by broader economics and culture. Weems employs photographic technique to this end, working with the genre of still life to point to the overlap between the domestic realm and larger systems of cultural structure and meaning—particularly those systems that reproduce and perpetuate racialization and racism. Still life then is an art historical genre that reinforces the idea, widely discussed in cultural studies and literary criticism, that the mundane, everyday, and domestic spaces and practices of a given culture both respond to and inform broader cultural practices, and that through an artistic or analytical engagement with the everyday, cultural systems reveal themselves.[413] Weems selects this genre for *American Icons* to underscore the mundane forms of racism that underlie domesticity, both in the past and in the present, as well as to connect the indeterminacy of her compositions with the uncertainty of power in real domestic spaces.

The composition of Weems' still lifes also supports this reading. Often in still life, the artist carefully selects and arranges objects before capturing or painting the image. In

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[412] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked,* 14.

[413] While my analysis here relies most heavily on Bryson, I also found the following texts on still-life to be useful in support of this point: Charles Sterling, *Still Life Painting from Antiquity to the Twentieth Century*, trans. James Emmons (1959; New York: Harper & Row, 1981); Ingvar Bergström, *Dutch Still-Life Painting in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1956); Jochen Sander, ed. *The Magic of Things: Still-Life Painting 1500-1800*. (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2008). For more on the everyday and its relationship to dominant cultural formations please see Ben Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction*, (New York: Routledge, 2002).

the sub-genre of vanitas paintings, which seek to communicate a moral lesson about the hollowness of worldly pleasures, the objects selected serve both aesthetic and symbolic purposes within the composition of the scene. Vanitas paintings were particularly popular among the 16th and 17th century Dutch elite, a group growing increasingly wealthy at that time due to colonization and international trade, including that of slaves. In these paintings, clocks, hourglasses, skulls, snuffed candles, and other objects that mark the passing of time or the mortality of humans sit among signs of opulence—food, jewelry, flowers—to indicate the hollowness of worldly pleasures and to remind the viewer that life is fleeting.[414] Bryson notes the irony that these paintings both condemned the consumption and valorization of worldly pleasures and were themselves worldly pleasures in the form of aesthetic objects, existing in a paradoxical limbo between critique and embrace of a rising capitalist culture. At times, these images also engage Christian iconography, where objects or animals stand in for religious figures and events in a visual lexicon that codes text as image in a way that might not be legible to a person who had not learned the lexicon. Both the title of Weems' series, which invokes iconography, and her use of racially-charged objects that encode cultural beliefs link her to the genre of vanitas and the long history of symbolically-loaded still lifes.

Where vanitas drew on Christian iconography, Weems' photographs draw on the visual lexicon of racist stereotypes that have permeated representations of blackness since

[414] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*; Sander, *The Magic of Things*; Bergstrom, *Dutch Still-Life Painting in the Seventeenth Century*.

the time of slavery.[415] Since the 1980s, a large body of scholarship has committed itself to unpacking, labeling, and categorizing these stereotypes, as well as uncovering their historical and cultural roots in an effort to undo them or to better understand the source and form of their power.[416] Perhaps stickiest among these constructions is the Mammy figure, the dark-skinned, maternal, asexual, obsequious domestic servant or slave that acted as helper to the mistress and mother-figure to the children of the master. Rooted in the patriarchal domestic ideologies of slavery, the figure of Mammy first appears in Antebellum and abolitionist writings from the mid-19th century.[417] The figure gained prominence in broader culture in the years following the end of the Civil War, as both a minstrel character and as an object of Old South nostalgia for white Southerners living amid the social upheaval of Reconstruction.[418] By creating a character who was both content in her slave status and who posed no sexual threat to white women, Southern

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[415] Weems' use of racist stereotype within her art places her within a burgeoning tradition among black visual artists. Kara Walker, discussed in more depth below, along with Glen Lignon and Michael Ray Charles, produce works of art that invoke the history of racist stereotype and racist imagery to produce an indeterminacy similar to that which I see Weems creating in *American Icons*. See Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010); Rachael Ziade Delue, "Dreadful Beauty and the Undoing of Adulation in the Work of Kara Walker and Michael Ray Charles," in *Idol Anxiety*, Josh Ellenbogen and Aaron Tugendhaft, eds. (Stanford: Standford UP, 2011); Kimberly Juanita Brown, *The Repeating Body: Slavery's Visual Resonance in the Contemporary* (Durham: Duke UP, 2015).

[416] Seminal among these works is Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby/Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar," *Diacritics* 17:2 (Summer 1987): 64-81. However, much Afro-pessimist scholarship arises from an examination of the persistence of racist images and representations rooted in the Antebellum and Reconstruction eras. See in particular Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*; Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

[417] For more on this, see Turner, *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies* and Roberts, *The Myth of Aunt Jemima*.

[418] Turner, *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies;* Roberts, *The Myth of Aunt Jemima*. For the root of Mammy in slavery, see White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?*.

writers could elide the violence required to control domestic slaves, erase the history of sexual violence and miscegenation that accompanied that control and undermined racial boundaries, and affirm themselves in the fiction that things had been better for both white and black Southerners before the war. Mammy, like Sambo, Uncle Tom, and other stereotypes that appear most often in racist collectibles like those in Weems' still lifes, functions to shore up racial hierarchies and ameliorate white fear by presenting slaves as content, stupid, and loyal. Patricia A. Turner writes that the cardinal rule of racist memorabilia, or "contemptible collectibles" as she calls them, is to "exploit only those stereotypes that assuage white fears and never those that aggravate them."[419]

Black figurines that represent these stereotypes objectify blackness both literally and figuratively, turning discursive constructions of racist archetypes into physical objects and reinforcing or reinscribing stereotypes that symbolically undermine black individuality and personhood. However, while these objects do encode blackness within the visual lexicon of racism, their meaning is not so stable as it might initially appear. Many historians of racist collectibles note that since the late 1980s, the majority of collectors of this kind of object are in fact black Americans, indicating that while originally intended to ease white fear, these objects now serve some other as-yet-unnamed function for their black American owners. Turner's text also describes reproductions of original pieces created and sold by a black-owned company. While the objects still reference a particular history and the stereotypes it produced and perpetuated, their meaning becomes more complicated as historical distance from slavery grows and

[419] Turner, *Ceramic Uncles and Celluloid Mammies,* 22.

the relationship of black Americans to histories of violence and the economic forces of capitalism changes.

Weems' photographs mobilize the unstable meaning of these overdetermined objects to provoke a panoply of audience responses and to call into complication the relationship between blackness and objecthood. In the monograph released to accompany *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*, a 2012 retrospective put on at the Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville, editor Kathryn E. Delmez asserts that Weems' intention in *American Icons* is to "force the audience to acknowledge the persistence of an undercurrent of racism within a culture that officially claims to frown on it and consider their own responses to the works, in both private and public environments, and their potential role as accomplice, be it as participant, consumer, or silent witness."[420] In other words, Weems' project is two-fold: one, to confront a viewer with the history and presence of racism and two, to elicit an internal reaction or response to the image that upsets an easy understanding of the viewer's individual relationship to that history. This kind of cultural work is done less within the frame and more in the space of the gallery, between viewer and image or perhaps even within the viewer him or herself.

THE OBJECT THAT COMES TO LIFE

One limitation to much of the journalistic and critical writing about this series, however, is that it appears to presume an audience aligned with whiteness. Delmez'

[420] Kathryn E. Delmez, ed. *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2012), 14.

assertion that the images provoke a consideration of one's complicity with anti-black racism indicates an assumption that all viewers—white, non-white/non-black, and black—will come to the images burdened with a hidden knowledge of their own investment in white supremacy. Philip Kennicott even further white-washes the imagined audience: "Without inserting any actual human beings into the images, Weems constructs an all-too-human trope of racist thinking: These images are too nice to be about race. The lamp and end table, the kitchen counter with its whisk and ladles and half a cantaloupe, become like people, soothing, full of smiles and grace, harboring bigotry almost undetectable among their finer manners and gentility."[421] While certainly one could find both non-black and black viewers of these images who might presume that an image could be "too nice to be about race," I question whether Weems, a politically-conscious collector of black folklore and invested critic of the whiteness of high art, would have created a photograph series that intended solely to offer moralistic instruction to predominantly white or whiteness-aligned audiences. By imagining, in addition, a black or blackness-aligned audience—a set of viewers whose relationship to racism, racist memorabilia, and the history of black domestic labor would not be solely complicit but also potentially melancholic, resistant, or subversive—the ways of reading the images multiply and Weems' engagement with history becomes less didactic and more suggestive, indeterminate, and potentially liberating. Images that might on the surface

[421] Philip Kennicott, "In Weems' Photographs, Revelation and Resistance" *Washington Post*, April 5, 2014, http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/museums/in-carrie-mae-weemss-photographs-revelation-and-resistance/2014/04/04/b35795fc-b9b9-11e3-9a05-c739f29ccb08_story.html (accessed June 17, 2015).

appear simple—"don't invite a second look" as Holland Cotter phrased it in the *New York Times*[422]—come to signify multiple meanings simultaneously, evoking the complicated web of sociocultural relationships, historical structures, and directional flows of power that underlie their still life composition.

Leah Dilworth understands the multiple significations possible for these images and for the racist objects they depict. *Untitled (With Kitchen Clock)*, the image with which I began this chapter, as well as *Untitled (Salt and Pepper)* (fig. 1) both offer visions of miniature servants—an Aunt Jemima figure in the former and a Mammy and Uncle Mose salt-and-pepper set in the second—that Dilworth reminds us "suggest how domestic labor, and domesticity itself, are racialized."[423] Where domestic labor might be invisible in the traditional bourgeois home, the domestic images in *American Icons* reverse this trope, making the "service objects" visible and erasing the (predominantly white) bodies that would benefit from that help. Dilworth notes that in the absence of a white employer/owner, "the miniature figures spring to life like toys in a fairy tale."[424] By making these racist objects the only humanistic part of the still life, Weems ensures that they become a focal point and the location of potential locomotion. For instance, in *Untitled (Salt and Pepper)* (fig. 1), Mammy and Uncle Mose sit on a kitchen counter, surrounded by the oversized (by their scale) kitchen utensils and electrical outlet one

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[422] Holland Cotter, "PHOTOGRAPHY VIEW: In Sharp Anecdotal Relief, a Regional Tale" *New York Times*, December 4, 1994, http://www.nytimes.com/1994/12/04/arts/photography-view-in-sharp-anecdotal-relief-a-regional-tale.html (accessed August 9, 2015)

[423] Leah Dilworth, ed. *Acts of Possession: Collecting in America*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2003), 256.

[424] Ibid.

finds in a typical kitchen. Their eyes are painted and the image is lit such that the figurines appear to be glancing warily at a cut cantaloupe to the left of the frame, perhaps ready to make a break for it. There is no confusing these objects for natural humans, but, as Dilworth notes, Weems' composition has "imbued these objects with a subversive subjectivity."[425] The salt and pepper shakers are clearly objects, and yet in within the image, they threaten to come to life.

The ability to read these images and the objects they contain in multiple ways depends on a more fluid understanding of object-hood and animation than might spring to mind at first thought. Susan Stewart's work on the miniature as cultural form is useful here. As discussed above, Weems' still lifes are unique in that they include miniature humanistic figures, rather than just objects of consumption. The inclusion of these miniatures troubles the line between still life and tableau, as miniatures threaten to transition from "hesitation to action, from the inanimate to the animate"[426] as in children's stories about toys that come to life. As Dilworth also argued, the presence of humanistic miniatures in the scenes and the choice on Weems' part to frame the images to their miniature scale imbues these still lifes with a potentiality for motion and narrative that can be read as subversive, agentive, or perhaps even fugitive. While this threat of animation has served a neutral narrative function in fiction and folklore, Stewart recognizes that the story of an object coming to life can be a "terror"[427] as well,

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[425] Dilworth, A*cts of Possesion*, 256.
[426] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection,* (1984; repr. Durham: Duke UP, 1993), 55.
[427] Ibid., 172.

particularly in that one of the comforts of the miniature is that it allows the viewer to take in the world from a panoptic perspective without having to engage any of the messiness of real human experience. This is why, Stewart notes, miniature scenes or objects so often depict nostalgic visions of "the lower classes, peasant life, or the cultural other within a timeless and uncontaminable miniature form."[428] For those who take comfort in the remove and stillness of a cultural other subjugated into miniature object-hood, the threat of the inanimate figure becoming animate produces more fear and anxiety than wonder and amusement. Stewart argues that the threat of animation inheres in the miniature, however, regardless its affective impact on the viewer.

In the 19th century, enslaved persons were also viewed as objects that held the potential to animate. William Goodell's widely cited 1853 pronouncement that "slaves, though moveable by their nature, are considered as immovable by the operation of law"[429] illustrates how the legal and natural status of slaves conflicted, dialectically producing a form of "immoveable" property that constantly threatened to become animated and take flight. Drawing from Antebellum legal history, Stephen M. Best describes one legacy of slavery as the creation of "a unique species of 'living property'—an *everyday animism* that cuts across the founding difference between persons and property."[430] The miniature

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[428] Ibid., 66.
[429] William Goodell, *The American slave code in theory and practice: its distinctive features shown by its statutes, judicial decisions, and illustrative facts*, (New York: American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, 1853).
[430] Stephen Best, *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 2. My emphasis. Best cites this legacy as impacting the nature of copyright law and the understanding of legal personhood into the present.

mirrors the everyday animism of the slave, in that one is a self-animating object and the other is an object that threatens animation, and both can and do exist in the everyday sphere of the domestic.

Weems draws on the terror/wonder of the miniature's threat of animation in *American Icons* to complicate a reductive understanding of the history of domestic slavery. The miniatures she chooses for her photographs depict racist caricatures popularized through minstrelsy and mass-produced in the years following the Civil War and into the early 20th century. As discussed above, her staging of these still lifes uses the threat of animation to produce the potential for subversive narrative in an otherwise still image and to call into question the static nature of object-hood. Most critical responses to *American Icons* understand that Weems wants to point to the history of domestic slavery/servitude and to the racialized nature of domestic labor. Often this criticism interprets the presence of racist objects as indicative of Weems' desire to show how black persons became "service objects" via the machination of enslavement, which leads to the accusations of pure didacticism and moralizing on Weems' part that I noted above. A nuanced reading of these images, however, demands a engagement with the scholarship on slavery that treats the slave's paradoxical status as both person and property and analyzes historical affective interactions between domestic slaves and their slaveowners. Putting Weems into conversation with this history imbues the images with potential subversion or threat, creating space for the possibility that Weems is mapping paths to

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For my purposes here, I am more interested in his meditations on the legal/natural characteristics of the slave.

resistance and liberation, rather than just illustrating and condemning a totalizing historical formation.[431]

A close reading of an image from the series might clarify this point. In *Untitled (Salt and Pepper)* (fig. 1), Weems' composition encourages a reading of the image in which overdetermined, racist objects threaten to come to life. The objects around the salt-and-pepper shaker in this photograph further a reading of danger in this image beyond just the threat of coming to life. The viewer can see that the cantaloupe has been cut cleanly, implying the use of a knife, and yet the kitchen counter holds only spoons, ladles, spatulas, and a whisk. The knife itself is a present absence whose effects the viewer can see but whose actual form he or she cannot. This imbues the image with a sense of mystery: where did the knife go? Does it still exist in this scene but beyond our view, or has it truly disappeared?[432] This small detail of composition opens up the still-life image to a panoply of narrative readings, which will differ depending on the set of assumptions or understanding of history the viewer brings with him or her to the image.

For example, one could read the absence of the knife alongside the inherent threat of the miniature as indicative of the idea that the miniatures have hidden the knife or know its whereabouts and are masking their plot through the invisibility produced by

[431] The history of racialized domestic labor extends well beyond the historical end of slavery, and even past the end of the Civil Rights Movement. However, because this dissertation grounds itself in the historiography of the plantation and the domestic relations within the social structures of slavery, I choose here to focus on the relationship between these images and this limited historical frame. Future work could certainly extend this analysis into the domestic relations of the 20th century.

[432] All credit for bringing this detail to my attention belongs with my seminar group at the Futures of American Studies Institute at Dartmouth in June of 2015, in particular Paul Fess and Kyessa Moore.

stereotype. This reading presents the subversive subjectivity Dilworth describes. Alternatively, however, one could also read the look of shock on the faces of the salt and pepper in this image as indicative of another subject or force beyond the visual field of the photograph who wields the knife. In this reading, their wary glances at the cantaloupe might indicate a fear of bodily harm, like the harm done to the cantaloupe itself. Perhaps beyond the field of vision the ostensibly absent white domestic inhabitant wields the knife to counter the threat of life that inheres in the miniatures. Other readings also precipitate from the absent knife—an object of both domestic production and bodily violence—and the actual intervention of the image exists in its compositional indeterminacy within an equally complicated historical power arrangement.

A similar kind of indeterminate threat appears in *Untitled (Porter Letter Holder)* (fig. 2). In this photograph, a letter holder painted to look like a caricatured black luggage porter pushing a trunk sits on a desk, backlit by a desk lamp and holding a bus or train ticket from the Metropolitan Transit Authority. Because the only light in the scene comes from the desk lamp situated behind the letter holder, its square "trunk" creates a long shadow in front of the porter. This trick of lighting, combined with the porter's at least temporary possession of a ticket to ride, suggests mobility even in a still scene containing only inanimate objects. A different viewer might read this image differently, however. In the context of the history of black train porters, mobility does not necessarily equate flight or subversion. Train porters moved around, but only with the permission of whoever oversaw their work. However, the position of porter still suggests a power—the power to move around physically as well as the opportunity to advance socially or

economically—that exists equally in both the image and in the history of Pullman porters.[433] If the sleeper car is a mobile domestic space, the types of power and vulnerability that characterize the relationship between black domestic slaves or servants and white masters or employers share a likeness to kind of power relationship found between the Pullman porters and those upon whom they waited.[434] Weems' image provides space for multiple readings—either readings in which the porter performs according to racialized expectations or in which he is stealing away with a ticket out. Again, the indeterminate composition is where the image does its cultural work.

By mobilizing history to animate objects in a still life composition, Weems' images offer a counter-argument to a totalizing narrative that shores up the myth of perfect white mastery and overdetermines blackness as a kind of perpetual death or objecthood. Her sense of history—that slavery as an institution sought to make persons into property and humans into objects, and that it was on some level successful in this goal—aligns with the dominant narrative of black or African American studies at the present, and her recognition both in *American Icons* and throughout her oeuvre that the

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[433] The figure of a porter might also be inherently subversive, if seen as a figuration for the labor struggles led by A. Phillip Randolph in the early 20th century. Part of the reason porters were able to advance economically was because they had already confronted capitalist power structures to advocate for better wages and working conditions. For more on this see William Harris, *Keeping the Faith: A. Phillip Randolph, Milton P. Webster, and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, 1925-1937, (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1977).*

[434] Other professions post-Emancipation engaged in similar power relations. See Douglas Walter Bristol, Jr., *Knights of the Razor: Black Barbers in Slavery and Freedom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2009) for a discussion of how black barbers discursively rejected the white supremacist logic that intended to belittle them while still performing their appropriate racial role. This too is an example of the fugitive indeterminacy I see descending from the structure of plantation slavery.

violences of the past reverberate into the present aligns her ideologically with the bulk of Afro-pessimist thought (and perhaps the bulk of black studies thought writ large as well). However, the potential to read these images as subversive suggests that Weems wants to raise questions about a narrative of social death that reifies the slave as a totalized identity and reifies the power of the master as absolute. Even when blackness is literally made into an object—a wall hanging, a letter holder—Weems is able to make that object threaten movement, which implies that blackness in human form, even under an oppressive system which sought above all else to reduce flesh to body,[435] certainly retains as much or more agency than a literally inanimate object. Engaging the iconography of anti-black racism to stimulate a multiplicity of audience reactions/responses, Weems' photographs explore the possibilities and limitations of seeing the "afterlife of slavery" as a condition for life as well as death.

However, these images do not have to be read as subversive. In fact, as I mentioned above, most critics did not read them as such. In this way, Weems' images prefigure the interpellation of the viewer Sharpe sees at play in the silhouettes of Kara Walker. Walker's provocative silhouettes have been the subject of much writing and criticism, both positive and negative, and her installations seem to elicit the ire and discomfort of both white and black viewers in equal measure. Sharpe argues that the root of this viewer unease is the presence in Walker's art of a "monstrosity that black and

[435] Here I use Hortense Spillers' distinction between flesh (slave as human) and body (slave as object) that she lays out in "Mama's Baby/Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar."

white viewers alike find themselves, perhaps in different ways, participants in."[436] Like Weems, Walker conjures the ghost of the monstrous intimacies of enslavement—what Sharpe calls the "disfigurations of black survival"[437]—in which black bodies and persons cared for and were violated by white bodies and persons in a network of sociality and affect wherein the lines of consent and the boundaries of agency are hard to draw.[438] Sharpe describes Walker's images as "allegories" for racial violence both in slavery and in the present, indicating a project similar to the iconography of racism Weems' photographs accomplish. In both cases, the artists demand audience engagement with the image, leaving enough ambiguity in the scene to provoke senses of complicity, revulsion, embarrassment, guilt, pleasure, or some combination thereof, in order to call up a cultural memory of the messy affective tangle created through the intimate violence of enslavement. Both Weems' and Walker's images toe the line between pleasure and fear, humor and horror, intimating the fraught history of relations between white and black in familial, domestic, and otherwise intimate scenes.

However, the role of a black female artist in the creation and installation of these images and scenes within the predominantly white art world necessarily complicates the kind of cultural work they do. Sharpe points out that Walker's art cannot be read without taking into account the way it "circulates among, adorns the walls of, and is in conversation most often with the (largely white and largely nonblack) art establishment…[and the way] these images traffic in different spaces and produce a

[436] Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*, 175.
[437] Ibid., 156.
[438] Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* also makes this point.

variety of responses (not to mention subjects)."[439] Sharpe imagines both white and black audiences for Walker's work and presumes that each one might feel different sorts of vulnerability or shame, or that they both might find themselves complicit in or excited by the stereotypical representations of blackness on display.

However, Sharpe points out that when white art critics compare Walker's art to the "cakewalk," they reveal the continuity between historical misrecognition of black cultural production by white slave-owners and the present-day misunderstanding of the profound and varied work done by Walker's silhouettes at the hands of white art critics. The cakewalk was a form of dance that emerged from slave plantations and eventually became part of minstrel shows post-Emancipation. Sharpe notes that the cakewalk carried multiple meanings for its varied audiences throughout its history. In its original form, it was often compelled by the master, but slaves used the opportunity of these dances to mock the lifestyle of their owners. White masters and mistresses, however, watched these performances through the lens of racial hierarchy, which masked open mockery as an "amusing attempt at sophistication on the parts of their slaves."[440] Sharpe refuses to reduce the cakewalk to either a wholly oppressive cultural form or a wholly subversive one, arguing instead that this historical formation, like Walker's art in the present, stages a scene in which different audiences, equipped with different knowledges, can and do read its meaning differently, while also potentially being made uncomfortable by the

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[439] Ibid., 177.

[440] Nadine George-Graves, *The Royalty of Negro Vaudeville: The Whitman Sisters and the Negotiation of Race, Gender and Class in African American Theatre, 1900–1940*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000) cited in Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*, 179.

paradoxical collusion of subjection and subversion in a particular form or moment. Just as white supremacy allowed the mockery of slave owners during the cakewalk by making black humanity and culture invisible, so too in the present does white supremacy, through its desire to see blackness "rendered transparent,"[441] mask the complicated relationship between subjection and pleasure—and particularly the role of whiteness in that relationship—that Walker's art explores. Walker's art might appear to mock its black figures, but the presence of white figures within the silhouetted scene points to the source of such "disfigurations," opening the installations to readings that are more critical of whiteness than they are of Walker's black caricatures. Walker's critics are not wrong that her art refigures the cakewalk—as a black artist, she performs in a white space ambiguously, allowing white supremacy to mask her critique by rendering her particular humanity, and in this case, her artistic genius, invisible or unbelievable.

American Icons also engages the indeterminacy of historical relations between masters and slaves, but on the plane of threat. Where Walker's work pushes the viewer to recognize their uncomfortable relationship to the tangle of violence and desire stemming from the intimate relations of the plantation, Weems portrays that intimate proximity as a potential locus of danger for those in power. Returning to *Untitled (Salt and Pepper)* (fig. 1), Weems' composition of the scene and the erasure of the knife could be read, as I argued above, as a figure for the invisibility of domestic labor and the threat inherent to the present-but-unseen purveyor of meals for white families. The expressions on the salt and pepper shakers, however, are ones of shock or perhaps fear, which opens the image

[441] Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*, 179.

up to an interpretation in which the racist figures fear the master or in which the master is wielding the knife. By not answering the question of where the knife is or who wields it, Weems references the intimate indeterminacy of power relations within plantation households. While the system of slavery (and any scholarship on slavery that indulges its claim to totality) located power only with the slaveholders and never with the slave, the fact that domestic slaves attended to sick and dying masters and mistresses, as well as daily preparing meals, serving meals, and caring for babies and children, means that slaves also had access to the vulnerability of their owners and their owners' families. The necessarily intimate relationships produced through domestic slavery both transgressed and obeyed the racial boundaries of plantation life, not wholly undermining racial hierarchy or the system of violent power that protected and benefitted from it, but certainly providing the opportunity for threat—particularly the threat of violence—to run both ways in the master/slave relationship.

The images clearly engage the history of racialized domestic labor, no matter at which reading a viewer arrives. However, it is critically important to understand that these objects, despite their overdetermined relationship with historical and contemporary racism, maintain the ability to signify on multiple levels, within the artistic context of mundane still life. Racist collectibles may have been created to ameliorate white fear and provide owners invested in white supremacist ideology with a sense of racial power, but as these objects circulate in the world and pass from owner to owner, they might come to

mean something different or even to mean multiple things at once.[442] Further, when placed in an art context, particularly in the genre of still life which has always illuminated the social structure of the everyday while also critiquing it, these "American Icons," like Christian iconography for the Dutch, might simultaneously signify both oppression and liberation, condemnation and embrace, depending on how the viewer chooses to read them. Even more, their indeterminate composition might suggest that even within material and historical domestic scenes the images evoke, oppressive power and subversive resistance always existed in tension and at play with one another. Rather than recognizing white power as total and black subjection as complete, as the didactic readings of white critics might suggest they do, these images mark a persistent fear/threat within the intimate spaces of domestic life that resists a reading of slave mastery as a totalizing or totalized form of power, impervious to resistance.

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[442] Dilworth discusses the complicated meanings of these objects at length: "For a white person, obviously, collecting negrobilia could work to reinforce racist thinking and feeling: to control and demean a loathed 'other.' At the very least the figures suggest the fears and desire at work in white Americans' attitudes toward black Americans, and there is a strong element of sadism underlying their comic aspect…These are abject objects, designed to remind whites of their own power and the 'usefulness' of objectified black people. For black people who own or collect these objects, they may represent relics of a distant past: it's safe to collect these things now that that chapter of history is closed. But that begat the question of the objects' appeal. These objects are reminders of how whites have imagined, despited, and humiliated black people. For African Americans, a mammy salt shaker signifies differently, and the relationship between the collector and the collected may become one of redemption. Embracing the objects of subjugation reinforces one's own subjectivity. Like the products of empire that circulate back to the colonized communities, these objects have 'lives' that reveal the complexity and ongoing permutations of the politics of collecting." See *Acts of Possession*, 257.

SLAVE RESISTANCE AND INDETERMINACY

Debates about the nature and impact of slave resistance pepper the historical literature on slavery.[443] Many of these conversations rotate around the concept of agency, and particularly around the possibility for and shape of agency in an ostensibly totalizing system. Scholars also debate the nature of resistance itself and what forms of action can be counted as resistance, with some scholars arguing that forms of resistance that only temporarily disrupt the system cannot be considered true resistance and other scholars noting that often these "everyday" forms of resistance weaken systems enough to create space for their eventual overturn.[444] Regardless of impact, substantial historical evidence suggests that slaves did resist power in whatever way they could. While this does not necessarily indicate wide-spread, successful, or coordinated resistance, it does point to the existence of agency—defined here as the ability to perform effective action to control one's circumstances—even if the strictures of enslavement deeply circumscribed that agency. As Damian Alan Paragas reminds us, "Agency should not be confused with success."[445] Agency, then, indexes potentiality and possibility rather than outcome—slave

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[443] Beyond Johnson and Glymph, discussed below, see also Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection;* Olwell, *Masters, Slaves, and Subjects*; Ellis and Ginsburg, *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation*; Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom*. The core canon of plantation historiography also touches on resistance. See Genovese, *Roll Jordan Roll*; Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household;* Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone;* Blassingame, *The Slave Community;* Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*.

[444] The foremost proponent of everyday resistance as a means of structural or cultural change is James C. Scott. See in particular Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance* and *Weapons of the Weak*. Olwell (previous note) and Tavia Nyong'o's *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009) see subtle resistance as less threatening and more in keeping with the Bahktinian carnival, in that it subverts the hierarchy only to reaffirm it.

[445] Pargas, *The Quarters and the Fields,* 8.

agency exists in the lacunas of slaveholder power and provides only opportunity. Agentive action on the part of slaves or any other subordinated/oppressed group or individual is always at best a gambit, but evidence suggests that such action did occur with mixed results throughout the temporal and spatial span of American slavery.[446]

Walter Johnson's *Soul By Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* offers an early and important description of slave agency in the historiography. Focusing on the New Orleans slave market in particular rather than offering a sweeping description of slavery as a whole, Johnson is able to locate agentive moments that exist not in spite of but because of the dual status afforded to slaves within the economic system of slavery. Johnson conceives of the moment of sale as a complicated interaction between multiple competing interests: that of the slave trader, that of the slave owner, that of the slave buyer, and that of the slave him- or herself. Each of these interests had to negotiate a relationship to the enslaved as both person and as property. Slave traders coached slaves on how to perform for best sale, while also sorting slaves into categories based on the character traits they held that might make them more salable. Slave buyers attempted to glean information about slave personality and behavior from the slaves themselves in an attempt to undermine the power of the slave trader's narrative. Slaves used conversations overheard amid the market and gossip spread within the slave pens to exert some choice over where they might end up living and to keep their families together or as close as

[446] I would add that it is important to think about slave agency as well because ignoring the tears in the fabric of power through which such action can occur precludes the ability of people in the present to locate, step through, and enlarge similar tears in present power structures. This idea speaks to my larger claim in this dissertation that the history of slavery offers maps to freedom as much as it describes a perpetual violence.

possible. At the core of Johnson's argument is the idea that the moment of sale in large part relied on the slaves' willingness to perform according to expectations, or to "act as they had been advertised to be."[447] While the threat of violence and social dispossession loomed large in the slave market, vastly circumscribing slave agency, it remains true that both slave traders and slave buyers necessarily had to consider the humanity of enslaved people—both in terms of salable properties related to personality and in terms of the ability to resist coercion by acting disingenuously—when enacting slave sales. A misunderstanding or misreading of this humanity, or the manipulation of expectations on the part of the enslaved, at times even led to escape for certain brave or opportunistic slaves. In the space between person and property within the being of the slave existed the possibility of manipulation of the system of value that determined where a slave might end up.

Johnson's detailed descriptions of the "mutual sighting"[448] of the slave market resonate with Weems' subtle subversion in *American Icons*. Johnson states that in the moment of sale, "the slave traders' carefully choreographed pageants were being interrupted by slaves' *unruly subjectivity*."[449] Indeed, it is this unruly subjectivity, or as Dilworth called it, a "subversive subjectivity," that disrupts the ordinary in Weems'

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[447] Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 16.

[448] I borrow this term from Alessandro Portelli, who uses it to describe the negotiations between interviewer and interviewee in oral history collections. I find the term useful for describing any situation in which it could be argued that one party has control over knowledge or information dissemination when really all parties involved have some sort of power to affect the outcome and production of knowledge. See Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1991).

[449] Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 162.

images. Weems evokes the memory of this subjectivity in service of the uncanny sensation her photographs produce. Freud defined the uncanny as "something repressed which *recurs,*"[450] or something frightening that exists within the heart of the familiar. The unruly subjectivity of ostensibly objectified enslaved people fits both definitions—it was both a repressed knowledge that appeared time and again through everyday resistance, flight, or revolt, as well as being something frightening that existed within the familiar, particularly in the case of slaves working in domestic spaces. This subjectivity is further repressed through the creation of objects like the miniatures features in *American Icons* and the discursive stereotypes that inform them. Weems' images then call on a doubly-repressed, doubly-revealed slave subjectivity, eliciting a sense of the uncanny for those to whom the history is familiar and legible.

Additionally, Johnson notes that the moment of sale did not exist as one thing, but rather "like a web of unforeseen connections, the morphology of a sale depended upon the point of departure,"[451] which is to say that each person—slave or free—involved in the sale necessarily saw the interaction differently. Much like the fugitive homes described throughout this dissertation, slaves who were aware of multiple systems of meaning could readily hide what they most valued from both slave trader and slave buyer via a manipulation of visible signs. Performances of acquiescence could mask resistance, but well-trained slave traders or slave buyers could potentially see through the performance as well. This multiplicity of meanings and significations also resonates with

[450] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003): 147.
[451] Johnson, *Soul by Soul*, 14.

Weems' images. One of Johnson's major interventions in the historiography of slavery is the assertion that the condition of slave was not static but rather shifted depending on context, due to forces both internal and external to the person reduced to that status through the institution of slavery. Similarly, Weems' photographs register multiple meanings depending on how a particular viewer reads both the object and context of the photograph. Her ability to produce an image with layered meaning draws on a history of the layered interactions between enslaved persons and their owners, buyers, traders, and spatial contexts. Depending on the viewer's "point of departure," the interaction between the miniature and the domestic space which surrounds it in each image might look different—for some uncanny, for some didactic, for some enticingly imbued with the potential for resistance.[452] The reception of the image depends on the system of signs through which a viewer understands what he or she is seeing, just as slave bodies were themselves once read through a network of competing significations.

Thavolia Glymph's work on domestic slavery, discussed at length in the first chapter of this dissertation, further supports a deeper reading of Weems' images than most art criticism has allowed. Where Johnson's text examines the slave market, a scene somewhat removed from the everyday domestic spaces of the plantation, Glymph's text focuses the interactions between domestic slaves and mistresses within ordinary domestic scenes. At the core of Glymph's argument lies the paradox of white Southern domestic

[452] As with Kara Walker, these images could also be read as humorous. However, the scope of this project limits my ability to delve into the fraught and well-studied relationship between subversion and humor. For a reading of the grotesque humor of Walker's silhouettes, see chapter four of Glenda Carpio's *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery,* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008).

ideology: "To function and to meet the standards of domesticity, the plantation household required the labor of enslaved women…At the same time, it required negative representations of enslaved women and their labor…to deny them consideration as anything more than tools of the civilizing mission."[453] White Southern domestic ideology held women to the same standard of domesticity as in the North, but social and economic structures of the South forced (or allowed) Southern women in the Antebellum years to rely on enslaved workers, who, as Best and Johnson have pointed out, were discursively and culturally "objects" but retained the human ability to act up and resist power in limited ways. In the lead up to war, slaves began to test the boundaries of their objecthood as they grew to realize that the system which defined them as such was being challenged.

According to Glymph, slaves saw the plantation household itself as a key space in which to contest their slave status and the ideologies that supported the system of slavery. Domestic slaves in particular understood the house to be the "space where the ideology of south white womanhood was constructed and reproduced through the labor and denigration of black women."[454] Because of this, the destruction of the plantation household stood central to imaginations of freedom on the part of the enslaved. Through this argument, Glymph's text offers evidence that runs counter to the depiction of domestic slaves as people who "did their job, knew their place, and, after slavery,

[453] Gymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 65.
[454] Ibid., 136.

remembered the plantation mistress and her household fondly,"[455] with a particular eye toward unraveling the Mammy mythos. Glymph describes the household as being another front of the Civil War, noting that "household slaves were the first to make trouble"[456] when rumors of war began to circulate. Domestic slaves "became more firmly committed to the destruction of the plantation household" as the possibilities and means of resistance began to open up to them during the cultural upheaval of the lead-up to war, in part because they had already been resisting the will of the mistress in subtle ways for years.[457] Historically, then, Glymph illustrates how domestic space had been and remained a site of contested meaning, both of the dominant ideologies of slavery and of persons who resisted their objectified status. While Glymph's text has no shortage of examples of the violent punishments meted out by mistresses, the ideological acrobatics in which mistresses had to engage to justify both their "unladylike" violence and the humanity of their slaves reflect the inability of slavery to totally reduce persons into

[455] Ibid., 100.

[456] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 100. Here Glymph uses "household slaves" while I have used "domestic slaves" throughout the chapter. I choose to use "domestic slaves" in an attempt to mark those who worked in/near the "Big House" without negating the fact that the plantation household ideologically encompassed the whole of the master's property. Under the contemporary definition of "household," all the slaves would have been household slaves. Glymph and I mean the same thing by these two terms, however.

[457] Camp's *Closer to Freedom* offers additional examples of how slave women resisted power through everyday means. I use James Scott's description of "hidden transcripts" to understand how these everyday forms of resistance eventually lead to more wide-spread and public revolt or refusal by preparing people to seize power when even a small opening occurs. For more information see Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance*.

objects, or even into the bounded category of slave.[458] Domestic slaves were aware of their role in the production of white Southern womanhood and used that small bit of power to manipulate circumstances to their advantage, both before but especially during and after the Civil War.

Glymph's text also indexes the anxiety that stemmed from mistresses' necessary reliance on enslaved workers to produce domestic space and to thereby sustain their gendered identity.[459] Glymph finds fear of slave resistance couched in terms of "behavior" issues in the writings of slave masters and mistresses, but notes that in light of the "warring intimacy"[460] that characterized the relations between the slaveholding family and the slaves that populated domestic space, the language of behavior must be understood to mask deeper fears about loss of authority or perhaps even life. Rather than acknowledging the real possibility or presence of slave resistance which would could call into question numerous ideologies that shored up the institution of slavery, mistresses in particular complained about the unwillingness or inability of slaves to behave as they should, mistaking intentional resistance to work for an incompetence on the part of domestic slaves. The resistance of domestic slaves, who cared for white infants and often slept in the same room or even the same bed as their owners, demanded ideological

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[458] I am reminded again of Hortense Spillers' contention that there "never was a Slave." See the introduction to this dissertation.

[459] Men experienced similar anxieties related to manhood, in that manhood required completely control of slaves without violence—manhood relied on slave complicity in the system of oppression itself. Therefore, any resistance to the power of the master threatened to undermine the master's power in all spheres of life, as his peers would cease to see him as fully enjoying his manhood. For more on that, see Intimacy and Power in the Old South.

[460] Glymph, *Out of the House of Bondage*, 37.

constructions that painted black persons as inherently incompetent or incapable of proper domesticity. This rhetoric masked the threatening knowledge that slaves were not totally subordinated human-objects but rather retained an agency that could be mobilized against the slaveholding family at any opportune time. Reading the archive against the grain, complaints about slave behavior reveal the existence of an invisible anxiety on the part of the mistress, whose life, sense of self, and ability to perform femininity relied (precariously) on the complicity of black women.[461]

Both Glymph and Johnson do the important work of animating the concept of "agency," which too often also becomes overdetermined in its own right. Rather than resolving "agency" into an absolute relationship of intention and event and thereby ignoring the fact that in a lived reality no action guarantees result, these texts discuss agency as a function of both limitations to and possibilities for power suffered or enjoyed by the enslaved. As I said above, agency is always a gambit for those subjected to the power of another person, system, or entity. The failure of agency to produce a desired outcome does not negate its presence, however, and the presence of agency among the disempowered still can precipitate anxiety on the part of the powerful. The undercurrent of agency running through domestic relationships that demand vulnerability of those who hold the power certainly suggests a potential for threat and anxiety, regardless what actions or events actually transpire.

[461] For additional discussion of this rhetorical and discursive masking of resistance, see Ch. 1.

The images in *American Icons* then play with this history of slaveholder anxiety/vulnerability and slave resistance/agency to hint at the threat or risk inherent in a domesticity sustained by enslaved or subordinated labor. Weems' wider oeuvre supports this reading, in that many of Weems' installations and exhibitions have featured both images of domestic objects or domestic objects themselves, imbued with the history of slave violence or annotated with captions referencing the long history of racial inequality, indignity, and terror that haunts Western modernity. In particular, the collection *And 22 Million Very Tired and Very Angry People* (1989-1990) features images of ordinary objects, shot in sepia tones and captioned evocatively. For example, a shot of the globe, centered on the Atlantic Ocean, is captioned "A Hot Spot in a Corrupt World," referencing the Middle Passage and the African slave trade. Later in the series, a shot of a hammer and a shot of a sickle hang next to one another, each labelled accordingly, a reference to the symbols of communism. At the end of the series, a picture of a rolling pin, parallel to the bottom of the frame against an empty background, reads, "By Any Means Necessary." Here, Weems directly connects the tools of domesticity—a rolling pin, common to many kitchens—to the rhetoric of revolution spoken by Malcolm X in the heat of the Civil Rights Movement. Weems suggests with this image that the tools of revolution need not be solely masculinist and once again calls on the history of domestic resistance to assert the primacy of women to the movements opposing the oppression and subjugation of black people in the U.S. In light of these other domestic engagements, it becomes more difficult to read *American Icons* as scolding or shaming, reproducing a reductive view of domestic history to the end of moralizing for a white audience. Rather,

these images all appear imbued with threat and potential, with a history of resistance that could invoke the uncanny, fear, hope, inspiration, or anger, in addition to its obvious elicitation of white shame.

ICONOLOGY AND ABJECTION

The title of the series—*American Icons*—points to the need to read these images in the context of iconography or iconology, both of which are art historical methodologies that interpret artwork through the recognition and cataloging of shared cultural symbols that appear in various works. Iconography in the 19th century developed visual lexicons that identified and cataloged the encoded subject matter and themes of painting and other artworks, and iconology in the 20th century then used that classificatory system as a means of analyzing the cultural or social content and meaning of works of art. Iconography and iconology, in their reliance on classification and data collection as means to uncover deeper or hidden sociocultural truths, clearly descend from the same epistemological paradigm as the racial classification and eugenicist programs Weems has critiqued in her other collections. In choosing to call this series *American Icons*, Weems indicates that the repeated visual content or theme of "America" has often been these stereotypical and racist images of blackness that work on multiple levels to distance blackness from the categories of both human and national citizen, to confirm the goodness of the institutions of slavery and segregation, and to confirm the whiteness and therefore the humanity of those who can own and gaze at these kinds of black images.

The iconographical classification of an object, however, rarely reflects the face-value meaning of it. Rather, iconography seeks objects that evoke mythologies through

their repeated associations with the figures/characters or events that form the content of myth. By calling the caricatures in these images "icons," Weems implicitly notes that they do not reflect a reality so much as they call up a myth or a mythology. This series indexes an American iconography, in which repeated caricatures of black people both create and reflect a cultural mythology of slavery/enslavement and black life post-emancipation.

As I mentioned earlier, the racist caricatures that populate *American Icons* grew out of Old South nostalgia during the Reconstruction and, following that, in the Jim Crow Era. Many of these caricatures have their root in blackface minstrelsy, where Eric Lott has argued both whiteness and blackness as cultural identities, as well as the boundary between them, became defined through the process of transgression and reinforcement.[462] The wide use and troping of particular racist caricatures in minstrelsy reflects a desire on the part of white audiences to see comforting images of happy and unthreatening slaves both during the era of slavery and following its end. Lott reminds us, however, that these characters and their cultural work was not static but rather reflected the dynamism of racial identity formation. In minstrelsy, these characters grew out of Southern depictions of slavery but circulated primarily in the north,[463] indicating the cross-regional flows of culture that produced the ideology of race in the U.S. and its corollary forms of racism. Despite the dynamism of this process of racial definition and codification, however, it did

[462] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993).
[463] Indeed, one of Lott's primary interventions is his location of this "theatrical practice" in the north rather than the south, while still allowing that the practice "ultimately depended on the material relations of slavery." See *Love and Theft*, 4.

in the end create a set of overdetermined and flattened caricatures that had, and continue to have, a long cultural life.

These flat characters, then, index the American iconography to which Weems' title refers. Racist caricatures reflect and reinforce the mythologies that shored up the system of slavery and other descendant systems of racial inequality—the myth that racial categories are natural rather than culturally constructed, the myth of black inferiority, the myth of slavery's benevolence. Because slavery is so central to the development of the American national project and American conceptions of freedom,[464] and because these caricatures became solidified within cross-regional culture flows, these racial icons reference not just a Southern mythos but one of the foundational national myths that girds the whole of American culture. In the same way that Christian or Roman iconography indexed prevalent European epistemologies that could then be decoded and used to better understand the cultures they reflected, Weems offers this American iconography to uncover the racial epistemologies that were disrupted but also masked by the gains of the Civil Rights Movement, and which remain foundational to American politics and culture.

The myth of black inferiority that these objects reflect justified the oppressions of slavery and shaped the reality of both white and black Americans. The western investment in rational epistemologies and scientific methods often masks the impact of mythology on social and cultural development in the U.S. However, the development of eugenics—the rationalizing of racism into a pseudo-science—indicates that the myth of

[464] See Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: Norton, 1975).

black inferiority held such power that it shifted the course of even those strains of thought that imagine themselves to be objective and immune to mythologizing.[465] This ideological complex comes to influence how both white and black people see others and see themselves—a distance from these debased depictions of black life shores up white identity, while black people must grapple with the vast chasm between how they are seen by others and how they see themselves.[466] White people further use this mythos to justify unequal treatment of white and black persons, both during the time of the slave system and after its historical end. Southern apologists argue for the benevolence of slavery and the contentment of slaves within that system using the cultural content of these myths; Northerners invest in segregation and discriminatory hiring because of the racial beliefs these myths communicate. A whole host of cultural practices and beliefs descend from the myth that racial categories and racial hierarchies are the product of natural selection rather than social engineering.

The stereotypes that reflect these myths also serve to make black *persons* invisible. As Hortense Spillers articulates, the machinations of racism create stereotypes "so loaded with mythical prepossession that there is no easy way for the agents buried

[465] The codification of black inferiority into law traced by critical race theorists like Kimberlé Crenshaw also evinces the power of these mythologies. Law is another sphere that imagines itself objective and yet propagated and reified these ideological formations. See also Khalil Gibran Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2010).
[466] W.E.B. DuBois' conception of the "veil" in *Souls of Black Folk* is of course the most often cited discussion of this double consciousness, but Franz Fanon's essay "The Fact of Blackness" in *Black Skin, White Masks* also touches on this idea.

beneath them to come clean."[467] Spillers describes an overdetermination that leaves no room for the existence of a black self, a fiction that engulfs anything human that might lay beneath it. Christina Sharpe notes the historical/material existence of black female domestic slaves and connects their historical existence to the propagation of the Mammy figure, but sees these stereotypes as empty rather than the site of a submerged selfhood. She states that "for the viewer [the Mammy figure] is an(other) indicator of desire and its absence, a placeholder, a cipher."[468] For Sharpe, Mammy might "circulate widely" but she "remains invisible nonetheless."[469] This is the paradox of these stereotypes: they render black selves invisible or impossible while overdetermining black bodies and forcing them into hypervisible realms of existence.

This mythology and its material effects resonate with the forms of home present in plantation slavery. As discussed in the first chapter, ideological constructions that erased or masked the potential for slave resistance formed a major part of the slave-master's dominion, while also providing the enslaved with an imaginary in which to hide themselves. These discursive formations provided a means of repressing a recognition of slave humanity that ameliorated white fear and guilt. Sharpe calls the sensation experienced when confronting these stereotypes an "uncanny pleasure," which she argues stems from their repressive function—they work to limit the possibility of black selfhood but also disguise the presence of a perhaps (or likely) very angry or very unwilling human being within the discursive or legal object. It is fitting, then, that this repressive

[467] Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 64.
[468] Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*, 160.
[469] Ibid., 161.

mythology descends from practices of home. In Freud's canonical essay on the uncanny, referenced previously, he analyses the etymology of the German word *unheimlich*, meaning uncanny, the root of which is *heimlich,* meaning homey or comfortable. Freud argues that this etymology evinces a deep linguistic connection between the uncanny and the domestic. The racial mythology that masks slave humanity and the corollary possibility of slave resistance is no exception. A viewer aware of the racial mythology these stereotypes reflect experiences an uncanny sensation, as the black humanity repressed through the machinations of the home subtly threatens to (re)appear.

American Icons inhabits the possibility and threat of that uncanny discursive space. Without negating the denigrative effects of these stereotypes on black persons, Weems' photographs extend the possibility that the invisibility that these stereotypes produce can also mask (fugitive) forms of life that exist beyond-but-within oppressive systems.[470] The uncanny pleasure of these stereotypes derives from the repressed historical fact of black humanity, even within the systems of enslavement that intended to exterminate it. Despite (or perhaps because of) the extensive rhetorical, physical, discursive, and legal efforts to deny personhood to black slaves, white slave owners remained (at least subconsciously if not consciously) aware of the possibility of resistance, retaliation, and flight on the part of their still-human property. The threat of action and the threat of a returning awareness of one's complicity in unwarranted,

[470] My argument here about the function and possibility of stereotype is similar to the move I see Ellison making with the character of Mary in *Invisible Man*. See Chapter Two.

immoral oppression both summon an uncanny sensation when some event or image offers a reminder.

The American iconography that Weems' series invokes and describes is not a static system of categorization then, but rather, indexes to multiple systems of meaning—this singular iconography informs multiple iconologies. Prismatically, Weems' composition of scenes around these static, overdetermined objects allows viewers with different relationships to the stereotypes these objects materialize to read the narrative of the image differently, bringing their own sense of limitation or possibility for such reductive or oppressive ideas and objects to bear on their understanding of the image. Much of the criticism of these images, then, has been limited by the inability of (particularly white) critics to see the iconography of these domestic scenes from different vantage points or to think about how the racist objects the scenes contain might circulate beyond the (predominantly white) world of fine art. Weems' images are not inherently subversive but offer the possibility of a subversive reading, just as they are not inherently didactic but can be read as condemning a history. The power of this artwork lies in its ability to signify on multiple levels simultaneously, to be both oppressive and liberating, to offer the kind of paradoxical freedom that inheres in the fugitive strategies of black life.

Weems' intentional engagement of indeterminacy indicates a desire to produce images that trouble a reductive understanding of racialized power. In this way, her project seeks a similar end to the theoretical work undertaken in Darieck Scott's *Extravagant*

Abjection. Scott's stated objective is to "trouble the notion of power"[471] itself by thinking about how even the terms on which non-dominant people engage in struggle are determined by the "ego-dependent, ego-centric (and masculine and white) 'I' definitions we have of power."[472] In Scott's argument, indeterminacy disrupts the totalized and unidirectional kind of power generally considered to be present in racialized interactions. While he is careful not to equate indeterminacy with power per se, he does push for the possibility that a plurality of power(s) could exist and that one need not seek the kind of domination enacted by those who presently hold power in order to find oneself empowered and/or free. For Scott, indeterminacy induces recognition of potentialities and capabilities for resistance, empowerment, and freedom that might otherwise be missed or forgotten by those seeking similar goals through traditional masculinist/nationalist political routes. Noting the limitations of such politics, Scott's project seeks a route through oppression that might not appear so prominently on the oppressor's map.

By composing indeterminate scenes using overdetermined objects, Weems gestures to a similar desire to disrupt dominant conceptions of power through the assertion that positions of abjection—of the kind of alienation from the self which use-objects like those in the images signify or elicit—might hold the potentiality of threat despite their apparent deadness. Weems' images suggest the animation of objects through the evocation of both a narrative indeterminacy within the image itself and a history of intimate indeterminacy within domestic space more broadly. Weems does not alter the

[471] Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination,* (New York: NYU Press, 2010), 23.
[472] Ibid.

construction of the figures, nor does she situate the objects in such a way that their threat is explicit or unavoidable. Rather, the locus of threat in the images is the indeterminacy of their composition itself—the threat is not of recognizable action but of invisible subversion, the slow assault on power performed by those with lots of time and little to lose. Weems and Scott both grapple with the animating tension of Afro-pessimist theories of black life: if blackness emerges from and remains in the condition of social death, an abject, "generally dishonored"[473] position, then can black social life even exist? However, in seeking the potentialities or structures of black life that are present in abjection or social death, scholarship runs the risk of either valorizing perpetual violence or negating the very real material and ideological shifts regarding blackness and black people that have occurred in the years since Emancipation. Weems and Scott make space for this tension through an invocation of indeterminacy—they suggest possibilities for the disruption or redefinition of power by refusing to view power as something absolute, permanent, or dependent on the recognition of others. They undermine the ideological foundation of white supremacist, masculinist domination by calling into question the legitimacy of its epistemologies of power.

The indeterminate space which Weems' images makes visual calls to mind Fred Moten's desire to "linger in, rather than jump over, the gap between fact and lived experience"[474] in "The Case of Blackness," which he suggests will help illuminate "the

[473] Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 13.
[474] Moten, "The Case of Blackness," 180.

ontological difference between being and beings."[475] Referencing the Fanonian "fact of blackness," Moten's essay questions how the lived experience of blackness might complicate the Afro-pessimist assertion of its ontological impossibility, or how lived experience might demand Afro-pessimism refine the terms of its argument. In turn, Jared Sexton in "The Social Life of Social Death" argues that Moten himself has misunderstood the terms in which Afro-pessimism makes its claims, converting "impossibility into prohibition."[476] Rather, Sexton argues that to say black life is impossible within Western modernity as a ideological, social, and cultural construct does not necessarily prohibit black life from existing. For Sexton, this paradox and the tension that descends from it marks the contribution of Afro-pessimist lines of theory to black studies, and this tension need not be resolved for the discussion to be useful to the field. Both Moten and Sexton inhabit a similar discursive space to the images in *American Icons*, holding in tension ontological deadness of black *being* and the possibility of fugitive motion for black *beings*. The impossibility of black life does not prohibit its existence but rather hides its presence, which can be both violence and potentiality simultaneously, in turn, and in tandem.

Weems' images map the location of historical possibilities of resistance and subversion by illustrating the indeterminacy of power relations within the mundane domesticity created or sustained through enslaved labor. Her images resist the reification of slave women and men as docile human-objects or of mastery as a total form of power,

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[475] Ibid.
[476] Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death," *InTensions Journal* 5 (Fall/Winter 2011), 36.

as well as extrapolating those complicated intimate relations beyond the historical boundary of slavery. By doing so, her work takes up the important political project of seeking forms of resistance and freedom that do not rely on the capture of mastery or the enjoyment of forms of power defined and controlled by those who seek the domination of others. Rather, Weems' images signify on a violent and painful history, suggesting threat, play, and uncanniness by animating an ostensibly static set of racialized images. By refusing to allow even the most overdetermined and hollow depictions of black life to remain still in her still-lifes, Weems seeks a source of resistance and freedom hidden within historical and material abjection.

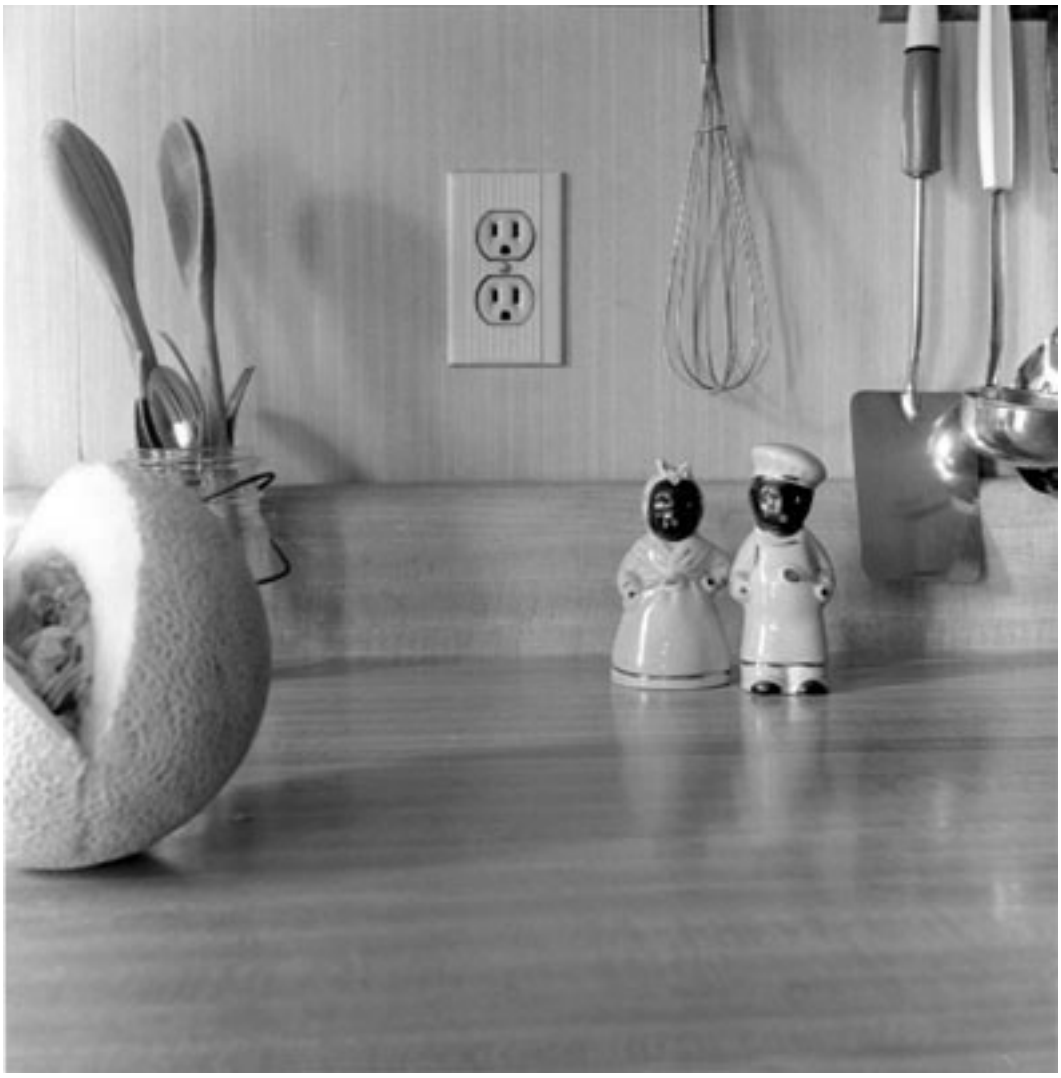

Figure 1. Carrie Mae Weems. Untitled (Salt and Pepper), 1988-1989 from American Icons. © Carrie Mae Weems

Figure 2. Carrie Mae Weems. Untitled (Porter Letter Holder), 1988-1989 from American Icons © Carrie Mae Weems

Conclusion

At the time of writing, Barack Obama's historic presidency is drawing to a close. I began graduate school just months before Obama's election, meaning that my graduate career has been spent watching the U.S. react to this hypervisible marker of black ascension. The covert and overt racism with which the president has been met and the rise of right-wing populists in the primaries for the 2016 election all signal the profound disruption to the perceived order of things that occurred when a black man moved into the White House. However, that a black man *could* inhabit the White House—a house both literally and figuratively built upon the labor of slaves—indicates the measured success of 20th century movements for racially-inclusive democracy and black civil rights.

The paradox evinced by the tenure of Obama's presidency—the profound hope proffered by the presence of a man with dark skin in the position he occupies alongside an increasing public awareness of perpetual anti-black violence—reveals its roots in the changing relationship of black artists and writers to fugitive homes over the course of the 20th century. How the authors and artists in this dissertation use fugitive strategies for home-making suggests how they can gain efficacy—at least psychically, since the novels cannot reveal real-world uses of these strategies—as the ideologies that shore up and attach to dominion find their cultural centrality at risk. This is not to say that white supremacy, patriarchy, or property ownership have ceased to be central pillars of American social structure, but if we have a black president with a feminist wife, their relationship to one another has certainly changed.

White supremacy and patriarchy faced major blows during the cultural shifts of the 1960s and 1970s, and property ownership for the middle-class may still be an ideal but became less and less possible following the economic downturn and deindustrialization of the country in the 1970s and 1980s. The housing crisis of 2008 also undermined the promise of the American Dream of home and business ownership in a way that has not yet been resolved. It remains difficult to discern, however, whether attachment to these ideals is any less strong for those who still have the most to gain from the structures of dominion. The connection between these three interlocking ideologies of oppression found re-articulation in political and social responses to both economic crisis and Obama's presidency. For example, Donald Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again" invokes an amorphous nostalgia for some ideal and now nearly-lost version of America, and its lack of specificity allows any disaffected voter who believes America used to be greater to attach themselves to its promise. For some, it invokes the reimagined, white-washed version of mid-century America popularized by Ronald Reagan and his supporters, while for others it might invoke the conservative victories this imaginary itself spawned in the 1980s.[477] In any case, the demographics of his base remind us that when facing the loss of economic security, white men and white women who benefit from their dominance reinvest in outmoded social ideologies in their attempts to ameliorate precarity. However, the profound anxiety of the present moment belies the promise of the structures of dominion to make anything great again, let alone

[477] It is worth noting that Reagan's reimagining of the 1950s as a time of stability, strength, and national unity erases the racial strife Ellison recorded, as well as the work of the women activists discussed in McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street*.

all of America. Lauren Berlant's idea of cruel optimism is born of the present moment, because optimism in this moment becomes increasingly cruel.

This cruelness of optimism in this moment does not simply resonate with Donald Trump's predominantly white, male, and working-class supporters; it provokes the debate around Afro-pessimism, as well. Where historically dominant groups in America worry at the loss of their power, black Americans and black studies scholars worry at the persistence of institutional structures of oppression in the face of social change. While much of the scholarship Wilderson names as Afro-pessimist appears prior to 2008, the naming of the trend and the debates around its central provocation appear a few years after Obama's election. The election of America's first black president precipitated a bevy of articles about "post-racialism," a fallacious argument on the part of predominantly white writers that Obama's election should signal the end of conversations about racism and racial inequality in the U.S. In response, black people in America—writers, scholars, and citizens—began the project of illuminating the locations where anti-black violence and sentiment persisted despite growing social equality. Afro-pessimism, which at core argues for the inability of western modernity to ever truly incorporate blackness, represents the radical scholarly wing of this impulse. Obama's election signaled the failure of a promise made to black America—that political ascendancy, respectability, and democratic inclusion might limit the ability of the American State to kill black humans with impunity.

Born of this moment of disillusionment, however, have been cultural and scholarly productions which seek possibility in new and unexpected places. In response

to Afro-pessimism, canonical black studies scholars began the project of mining a theory of black optimism from the shared recognition that perhaps the structure of the world could not radically change via institutional means. Kendrick Lamar writes songs that radically affirm black self-love, address the grammatical gap between poor and middle-class black Americans, and argue that surviving a history of racial oppression can buoy a sense that "we gon' be alright."[478] The Black Lives Matter movement advances a rhetoric that makes black life central to its claims, eschewing the language of structural rights in an effort to produce a cultural shift. As this dissertation shows, such productions have their root in very old practices, but these practices gain primacy in this particular moment. The symbolic ascent of a black man into the position of dominion over the nation, and the failure of this ascension to drastically alter black lives writ large in the present, suggests that perhaps seeking dominion offers less freedom and protection than it promises.

This dissertation reveals two things: the long historical window in which black Americans attempted to use the strategies of home-based resistance that inhere in plantation slavery to experience freedom and thriving, and the shifting conception of the

[478] In the album version of "i," Lamar includes a recording of a poem after the end of the song in which he re-writes the history of the n-word and directly addresses Oprah's discomfort with his using it. He makes the argument that his use of the term descends from its African meaning, in which it would have indicated a kind of royalty. Although this neo-pan-Africanism may have its own limitations, he speaks across a gap in black culture with intentionality, and his revisionist linguistics seem in keep with a project of black optimism. This quote comes from "Alright," the chorus of which references the long history of black oppression ("We've been hurt, been down before") and the presence of police violence ("We hate po-po, wanna kill us dead in the street for sure"), but ends on the hopeful note cited here.

possibilities and limitations of strategies born out of oppression to produce legitimate freedom. The historical organization of this document reflects my desire to show both continuity and change—although the archetypes, formations, and strategies I describe persist throughout the 20th century and into the present, different historical moments represent and use them differently. This fact alone troubles Wilderson's totalizing frame for racial categories and relations, but it does not serve to wholly undermine his central assertion that the violence at the foundation of western modernity continues to haunt its cultural productions. This document, however, productively animates the tension between Wilderson's provocation and the desire of black thinkers to refuse his negation of black humanity within western social constructs.

The preceding chapters lay out a historical trajectory away from a lived experience of slavery and toward a post-Civil Rights reimagining of it. As writers and artists move further from slavery historically, it becomes less a material reality and more an object of theory. The oppressive realities of slavery and its aftermath cloud Ellison's ability to embrace the fugitive home as an unambiguous source of liberation, but as this project moves through the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, it sees writers and artists like Morrison and Weems becoming more able to dig for the resistant histories hidden beneath the violence. Moten and Harney, writing in the present, speak openly about fugitive strategy, and their work circulates well beyond the bounds of a clandestine fugitive public. If, in the present, subversive fugitivity has become the explicit topic of published book chapters, something about the possibilities for blackness in the U.S. has certainly changed.

However, one limitation of this document is that its scope did not allow me to sufficiently parse the varied factors that impact this cultural shift. Ellison writes from a particular historical position, but he also writes from a masculine gender position, which would necessarily make his relationship to the power of dominion different than that of Toni Morrison or Carrie Mae Weems. Moten and Harney are tenured academics, and their relative security might enable an openness about and faith in the fugitive that belies its actual efficacy within the social world. This dissertation additionally gives no space to understanding where immigrants, non-white/non-black people, or impoverished whites locate themselves within this formulation, or how looking at non-U.S. sites of enslavement alters the framework I have presented here. The ability of this dissertation to speak to the cultural structures of the present is hindered by its inability to fully theorize the broad spectrum of variations that exist on the continuum between the ideals of dominion and fugitivity.

I chose this framework, despite its limitations, because it allowed me to discuss the fraught relations between home, power, and freedom that descend from plantation slavery in a way that directly responds to Wilderson's Master/Slave binary, while leaving the door open to complicate this framework through later work. Wilderson, who puts scare-quotes around "historical record" in *Red, White, and Black*, would likely challenge my methodology, as he views history as an epistemology which is too ingrained in the ideologies of western modernity to be a means of disrupting his theoretical constructions. However, Wilderson's argument rests on the notion that Master and Slave ought to be theorized "as positions first, and as identities second," and I seek to disrupt the notion of

static positions not through an invocation of identity or experience, but through an exploration of human practice. If people acted according to their position within a theoretical model of oppression, revolutions would be a much cleaner affair. Unfortunately, people act in secret ways which they hide from power, like the practices I call "fugitive" in this document, and these actions can trouble the bird's-eye view that structural positionality proffers.

Home is a particularly salient category of analysis through which to bring such practice-centered critiques to bear because home often gets ignored or flattened in cultural analysis. For instance, in *Red, White, and Black*, Wilderson argues against the universality of domesticity by noting that "slaves had quarters but not homes."[479] Later, he reiterates this claim when discussing the "oxymoron" of the black home. He uses the quarters to analogize "the absolute vulnerability of Black domesticity," describing them as, "a 'private' home on a Master's estate: a building with walls and a door, the vulnerability of which is so absolute that it can be considered neither 'private' nor 'home.'"[480] Note, however, that Wilderson equates home with domesticity, and cites the violation of privacy as key to its vulnerability. This formulation refuses the possibility of a home built around a recognition of vulnerability, a home which might resist violation, not by demanding the master recognize its privacy, but by not appearing to be private or not appearing at all. This formulation also refuses the possibility of a slave (or a Slave) who absents him or herself from the plantation and makes a home elsewhere. Above all,

[479] Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, 43.
[480] Ibid., 127.

this formulation denies a recognition of homes beyond domesticity, which dismisses actual human practice in the present as much as in the past. Wilderson describes the world from the Master's viewpoint, which of course reifies the dehumanization of the Slave. What people do on the ground, and particularly what they do everyday to produce intimate relations and cultivate selfhood, disrupts the totality of grand, overarching theory.

Additionally, by thinking about home as productive/protective of selfhood above all, scholars can move away from the conflation of home with blood-family that so often occurs in the literature on enslavement. This, like many aspects of the historiography of enslavement, descends from its foundation in the sentimental literatures of abolition. In an era when producing sympathy for the enslaved among middle- and upper-class white women was key to ending an oppressive system, texts necessarily emphasized the inability of slaves to protect blood-ties or to produce normative domesticity. This emphasis colors the primary documents which sourced later histories. Further, because blood-family remains so central to dominant conceptions of home, even in scholarship, the relationship between blood-ties and home in enslavement continues to be a key axis of the discussion. In light of work being done to complicate "home" in the present moment, however, scholars can now bring these redefinitions to bear on history to create space within the narrative for more kinds of intimate ties and social worlds.

My attempt to theorize a fugitive home in antagonism with dominion, which produces the home most in keeping with normative domesticity, reflects my attempt to make this type of intervention into slavery scholarship. As contemporary disappointment

in long-dominant social structures continues to eat away the layers of mythologized history to expose hidden resistance, scholars have the opportunity to more fully describe the panoply of responses to power engendered by human practice. In this moment of social, economic, and political crisis, such intellectual work holds the promise of undergirding real cultural change, not through a reinvestment in outdated optimisms nor through a refusal of hope, but through seeking places where freedom has always and continues to exist, hidden within the ordinary, in the last place they thought of to look.

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